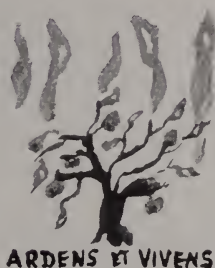


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SIN AND NOTHINGNESS IN THE  
THEOLOGY OF KARL BARTH



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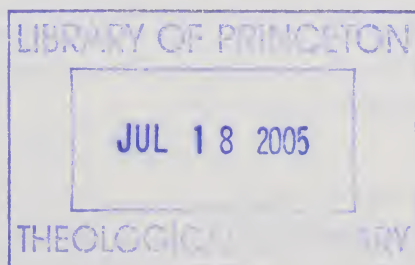
# SIN AND NOTHINGNESS IN THE THEOLOGY OF KARL BARTH

WOLF KRÖTKE

*With a new Foreword by the author*

*Translated and edited by*

Philip G. Ziegler and Christina-Maria Bammel



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## Editor's Foreword

How does a theologian or historian take evil with the seriousness it deserves without attributing more power to it than to the good of which it is a derivative reality? That question, in some form or another, is posed in epochs of great crises and in ordinary testings as perilous as they are subtle. Just to refer to it as "the problem of theodicy" already takes the edge off the existential sharpness of the dilemmas inherent in the ways humans contend with the undeniable facts of good and of good's radical distortions. One of the boldest and most thorough grapplings with these matters of ultimate concern is Karl Barth's, a study of which by Wolf Kroetke is here made available in English.

One of the things which most recommends Professor Kroetke's treatment is that it was originally worked out in the overtly hostile political context in which the Church found itself in the DDR. It is deceptively easy to discuss evil and nothingness when one enjoys relative ease of expression, but writing and lecturing in a costly environment yielded the winnowed integrity one finds time and again among theologians who worked for decades in independent theological faculties in the East. I therefore recommend that readers not skip the autobiographical remarks that constitute Professor Kroetke's new Foreword.

For the present English version, we are indebted to the vision and care of Philip Ziegler, now Assistant Professor of Systematic Theology at the Atlantic School of Theology, Halifax, Nova Scotia, and Christina Maria Bammel, now a member of the staff of the Konsistorium of the Evangelical Church of Mark-Brandenburg, Berlin. Professor Kroetke's own Introduction is an astute commentary on the consequences of much of contemporary theology's willingness to gloss over both the weight of sin and the greater reality of grace.

— David Willis

### NOTICE

From its inception, *Studies in Reformed Theology and History* has been underwritten by Princeton Theological Seminary and been made available *gratis* to those who cannot afford a subscription and to others at a minimum cost. Though we have several fine contributions awaiting publication, the present monograph (New Series, Number Ten) is the last to be financed that way. Conversations are underway with commercial publishers who, we hope, may find it feasible to continue *Studies in Reformed Theology and History*, but as a profitable enterprise. Look for what we hope will be a continuation of the series under new auspices.

— David Willis



## Foreword to the English Edition

When this book first appeared in the *Evangelische Verlagsanstalt Berlin* in 1970, it bore no foreword. I dispensed with it because the Office of the Censor of the German Democratic Republic demanded that I erase all references to the place and the circumstances of its genesis. The book had emerged at the so-called *Sprachenkonvikt*, as the *Kirchliche Hochschule*, which the *Evangelische Kirche Berlin-Brandenburg* had set up in East Berlin after the building of the Wall, was called. The school was to ensure the freedom of theological education and academic research as well as its relation to the churches under the conditions, imposed by the dictatorship, of the state's worldview. This institution was a thorn in the side of the state governed by the *Sozialistische Einheitspartei* (SED), which incessantly harassed and pressured us to refer to ourselves by an entirely misleading name. We were denied all rights relating to the qualifications of higher education, including those concerning doctoral studies. In order to advance the new generation of scholars nevertheless, a procedure for attaining scholarly credentials within the church was introduced that followed the rules governing the process of doctoral studies in German universities. Academic titles could not be conferred. So my friends playfully referred to me as "*doctor ineffabilis*" when I received a doctorate through this procedure for work done on Karl Barth's doctrine of nothingness and sin. The first freely elected government of the GDR officially recognized doctorates of this kind in 1990. Thus, after a delay of more than twenty years, I latterly received the academic honour I had earned. Before this, in 1983, I had already faced a real fight to publish the book (with an additional chapter) with *Neukirchener Verlag* in West Germany (that "hostile foreign country"! ). Since then, the work has claimed its place not only in discussions of Karl Barth's doctrine of sin and nothingness, but also in wider debates concerning the theological understanding of evil and sin required in our present day and age.

I am very pleased that the history of this book can now continue with an English translation. For me this in its own way exemplifies how questions concerning the truth of the sort put to us by Christian faith cannot be suppressed for long. Readers will notice that the concrete situation in which I investigated Barth's convictions concerning just what evil and sin are when seen in the light of God's truth is addressed only relatively faintly. This reflects the desperate censorship to which all publications were subjected under "real existing socialism." My work was originally three times longer than it was when it was finally printed. To make publication possible at all, I had to tighten the whole thing and distill it to its elements. I emphasized those fundamental decisions upon which rest Christian understanding of and ecclesial discourse about evil and sin. The small victory of this tightening was to outwit the guardians of the atheistic ideology. They were keen to search out the public voice of the "class enemy." But what they overlooked in this search was how they themselves, together with their whole array of lies, were unmasked here. In the end, things worked out as they frequently do when people plot to suppress truth. My attempt to say this under these conditions did lead to a positive outcome. With his prolix style, Karl Barth consistently tempts his interpreters to become prolix themselves. This was also the case in my original version of this work. But, thanks to the predicament in which I found myself, if I were to say anything at all about nothingness and sin there had to be a tight analysis of the structures of Barth's thinking related to these themes. To my mind, the text concentrates on the decisive thing to which all Christian talk of evil and sin must submit itself.

Because the book became as effective as it did precisely in this form, I have refrained from expanding this English translation with accounts of the situations in which Barth's insights are practically significant. From the beginning of my engagement with his understanding of evil and sin, there was never any doubt for me that this practical significance consisted in a comprehensive *encouragement to freedom*. I was actually to have written my work in Basel at the invitation of Karl Barth. But the authorities in East Germany would not allow me to travel abroad. So I began to read through the whole *Church Dogmatics* in Berlin in a small room on the fourth floor of the *Sprachenkonvikt*. When I looked through the window I could see the Berlin Wall scarcely five-hundred meters away. From the outset, cries and shots in the night saw to it that my proximity was not forgotten. Before any conceptual analysis and reflection on apparently difficult relations, it was immediately evident to me why people's evil actions deserve to be called "nothing." What was playing itself out before my eyes was absurd. A boundary which threatened the natural communication of its citizens, families, and friends was drawn right through

the middle of a vibrant city. It was spectral, but exactly as such also real in brutal ways. In itself it was *nothing*, but exactly as such it was dreadfully significant. And yet, it was passed off as something truly good by a great mass of shameless lies.

The same structure clearly repeats itself wherever people do that which we call “evil.” Karl Barth wrote his doctrine of election, in which the decisive directions for his theological understanding of nothingness are set out, in the midst of the Second World War. In the face of the crimes with which Nazi Germany was blanketing the world, Barth, in his theological knowledge of the God who elects the human creature, arrived at the insight that evil is nothing. Objections that characterizing evil as “nothingness” will result in evil being played down, or in actually playing it down, are already dealt with by this fact. John Webster and John C. McDowell have said what is necessary to meet this persistent prejudicial judgment of Barth’s texts.<sup>1</sup> Yet it ought not to be forgotten that talk of nothingness belongs in the existential context of gazing firmly at the inconceivable magnitude of the horrors unleashed by human beings. In light of the knowledge of the generous and affirming God, any and all reasons given to justify evil are shown to be untenable, senseless, absurd, and, precisely in this way, *nothing*. Evil always endeavors to conduct itself so irresistibly that men and women freeze before it, either in fear or in fascination. Knowledge of its nothingness allows us to breathe and sets us free to support resistance to it.

Yet, at that time I also put up with evils of much smaller kinds which “real existing socialism” bestowed upon us. Already as a younger man I had had a bad experience with a kind of boisterous resistance. As a result of this, I spent the better part of two years in prison. When I then became a theologian, I learned that human acts of resistance to evil chiefly entail asserting a truth that strips evil of any and all putative grounds. For there are no grounds to justify destroying the unique opportunity to live or to infect the relationships in which we exist as human beings with both physical and psychic death. Those people who do so know this, or else suspect it unconsciously, and so they adorn their destructive business with the appearance of good and wager everything on the hope of not being shown up as evil. For where evil is revealed in the light of truth it sinks back into its peculiar groundlessness. We have experienced this phenomenon twice in more recent German history. All at once after the collapse of National Socialism in 1945, no one wanted to

<sup>1</sup> Cf. J. Webster, “‘The Firmest Grasp of the Real’: Barth on Original Sin,” in *Barth’s Moral Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), pp. 65–76, and J. C. McDowell, “Much Ado about Nothing: Karl Barth’s Being Unable to Do Nothing about Nothingness,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, 4, no. 3 (2002): 319–35.

be a Nazi any longer or to advocate for the baseless explanations of anti-Semitism, racism, and genocide. When the mendacious pretense concerning "real existing socialism" came to an end, nearly all those who had sung songs of jubilation to its humanly contemptible practices declared themselves to be innocent. Scarcely anyone was willing to take responsibility for the harm that was done. Nothingness can only achieve its successes in the darkness of obfuscation, but not in the life of truth. I came to understand this as I read Karl Barth a few meters' distance from the Berlin Wall.

In the course of this I did not become a "Barthian" who uncritically parrots in reverent tones what Barth has said. Yet I could never comprehend the classification of his theology as "neo-orthodox," as was so widespread in the Anglo-Saxon world. "Neo-orthodox" would mean that from among all the swaths of experience only the church dogma of yesteryear would be deployed. It already becomes obvious that such a view is distorted when we consider the critical treatment and threatening questions with which Barth scoured the dogmatics of the historic church. But above all, such prejudicial judgments obstruct free access to that dimension of Barth's thought that is saturated with experience, manifest for instance in his narrative descriptions of sin in the paragraphs of the doctrine of reconciliation that treat the theme.<sup>2</sup> That one can also *laugh* while reading Barth is something that has been particularly beneficial for me, for evil in all its forms looks to rob us of laughter. Concentration camps are still today places where blank horror grips us. The images of the victims of terror and putatively just wars that reach us every day trigger helpless desperation—that is, if we have not already become numb. If the evil acts and aspirations of men and women achieve their ends, all that in fact remains for us is tears. But so long as evil is still stage-managing itself and impressing people with its false luster, laughter makes manifest the full banality and stupidity which is always afield when nothingness aggrandizes itself. And such laughter is also feared by the protagonists of such stage-management. In the former East Germany there was actually a paragraph in the criminal code that made "disparaging" jokes about the authorities punishable by law.

For Barth, the freedom to laugh in the midst of the barbaric stage-management of evil was a moment of that freedom from sin we experience in faith in Jesus Christ. It was a variation on the Easter laughter of the early church in view of Christ's victory over "sin, death and the devil." Whoever lives from this victory cannot finally take nothingness seriously, despite its terrible

<sup>2</sup> In his *Evil and Theodicy in the Theology of Karl Barth* (New York: Peter Lang, 1997), Scott Rodin has made this experiential dimension of Barth's understanding of nothingness readily visible in his own way.

consequences. The Swiss theologian did not possess much of that “melancholy of the North German plains” with which German theology—particularly that following in the tradition of Martin Luther—time and again reinforces the shadowy mystery of sin and evil. We cannot relate to evil in our Christian freedom while we fixate upon it. On the contrary, the task of Christian faith to which God sets us free consists at all times in struggling against evil with thoughts, words, and works as well as in every other respect. Hence it has rightly been noted that there is in Karl Barth’s understanding of evil and sin an eminent potential for theologies of emancipation<sup>3</sup> and liberation.<sup>4</sup> Still, in a reality usurped by nothingness, we all too seldom experience proof of that which is entirely evident in our theological knowledge.

I belong to those who, at least once in their lives, have been able to have just such an experience. On the 9th of November 1989, I passed through the Berlin Wall at the *Oberbaumbrücke* border crossing in Berlin in the midst of a gigantic crowd of jubilant people, many of whom were crying for joy. There, this absurd edifice was finally shown up in the totality of its nothingness and thereby an end was made of it. It was nothing other than the power of the truth that broke through it and caused it to collapse like a house of cards. “No violence!” was our cry. The complete transformation of the world order that was unleashed by the collapse of the socialist system, bristling as it was with arms, allowed us to dream for a moment of a world in which there would no longer be such manifestations of nothingness. Even today, I am not ashamed of this dream. For indeed it was not merely a dream. Alive in it was the spirit in which, from my room in the *Sprachenkonvikt*, I had looked out upon a particularly vile product of nihilistic human *hubris*. But the exuberance with which I walked—whistling Mozart!—back home in the early morning hours past the border guards and their friendly greetings is today only a memory, even if a beautiful one. New and unanticipated eruptions of nothingness in our economically and religiously divided world confront us with perhaps greater problems than did East–West tensions before 1989. The unspeakable misery that afflicts millions of our fellow human beings on God’s beloved earth descends once again like a paralyzing fate upon our globe.

I ask myself where in this situation there is still to be found an ecumenical Christian faith that finally takes seriously the fact that it sees through and

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Concerning all the criticism which is—and not without justice—leveled at Barth’s understanding of nothingness: K. Green-McCreight, “Gender, Sin and Grace: Feminist Theology Meets Karl Barth’s Hamartiology,” *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 50, no. 4 (1997): 415–32; D. L. Migliore, “Sin and Self-Loss: Karl Barth and the Feminist Critique of Traditional Doctrines of Sin,” in *Many Voices, One God* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1998), pp. 139–54.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. on this theme G. Hunsinger, “Karl Barth and Liberation Theology,” in his *Disruptive Grace: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), pp. 42–59.

refutes acts of evil and destruction as hollow and revolting. At an ecumenical council in 1932, the young Dietrich Bonhoeffer called upon the *Ækumene* to outlaw war. He imagined that Christians dispersed across every nation might thereby make war impossible, that they might not take part in it. Even at that time this initiative found but a slight echo and was subsequently and decisively overrun by the murderous course of events. Karl Barth, who was; not a pacifist, appears not to have put much stock in the initiative of this young theologian who later would reveal to him with a trust wholly uncommon to him his participation in the resistance to Hitler. But this initiative of 1932 was certainly of the spirit in which Barth has composed his doctrine of nothingness and sin. I understand it to be a well-founded challenge and earnest entreaty to all those whom the Spirit of Christ has touched to stand together in the refutation of nothingness.

I would like to thank my assistant, Christina-Maria Bammel and, above all, Philip Ziegler, who has in particularly sensitive and varied ways rendered great service to my theological endeavors and so also to the coherence of this translation.

—Wolf Krötke  
Berlin, October 2003

## Foreword to the Second German Edition

This investigation, whose basis lies in work done toward an ecclesial qualification at the *Sprachenkonvikt* in Berlin, appeared in 1970 in the German Democratic Republic and is reprinted here once again. It is with genuine pleasure that I am taking the opportunity to publish it now in the Federal Republic of Germany, since demand for the book (which always touches me) indicates to me that it can still usefully serve discussions of Karl Barth's theology.

I have decided not to alter the text as it is consciously plotted out in a very strict manner; only a few errors have been removed. In this editing I have been greatly helped by Herr Repetent Harmut Scheel. In a postscript, I take a stand in relation to problems which more recent discussion of Karl Barth's doctrine of nothingness and sin, as well as the question of evil in general, have opened up. My remarks in this postscript emphasize important insights in Barth's fragmentary "Ethics of Reconciliation" (first published in 1976), which follow from his doctrines of nothingness and sin.

In valued time shared together, my teacher and friend Eberhard Jüngel has stimulated and accompanied this work. I owe him much. Therefore, it pleases me greatly to be able to thank him publicly at this time.

—Wolf Krötke  
Berlin, 1982



## Introduction

There is but one substantial discussion of sin in contemporary Protestant theology: the engaged discussion of Karl Barth's doctrine of nothingness and sin. To this point, the discussion has yet to yield a decisive conclusion. The controversy surrounding Barth's doctrine of sin and nothingness has remained inconclusive chiefly because, whether affirmed or negated, it has not been possible to advance further into the matter itself. Obviously this has to do with the fact that human sin is not a central theme of contemporary theological discussion. The controversy surrounding sin at the time of the Reformation is of interest mainly as an historical theme. And the problems that German philosophical Idealism with its view of "evil" bequeathed to theology seem to have been settled in the great work of Julius Müller.<sup>1</sup> At the beginning of our century, the so-called "dialectical theology" did in fact rekindle the Reformation controversy surrounding human sin in a new way. However, since that time the theme has ceased to command attention.

In all this, something long observable in ecclesiastical practice appears to be repeating itself on the theological plane. People of our day have lost the awareness of their sin. This is a strange fact given the manifestations of sin in the world of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, for men and women of our era, sin has vanished.<sup>2</sup> It has vanished for them just as God has vanished for them. For this reason, the question of God that moves theology in our day must remain most closely intertwined with the question of how it became possible for sin to disappear for humans.

This question can certainly be answered both psychologically and sociologically. But these answers do not remove theology's task of providing an

<sup>1</sup> Julius Müller, *The Christian Doctrine of Sin*. 2 vols., trans. W. Pulsford (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1852).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. E. Jüngel, "Gottes umstrittene Gerechtigkeit," in E. Jüngel and M. Geiger, *Zwei Reden zum 450. Gedenktag der Reformation. Theologische Studien* 93 (Zurich: EVZ-Verlag, 1968), p. 18ff.

answer on the basis of the theological matter itself. Both theology and proclamation can reasonably defend themselves against the disappearance of sin from the range of human vision only if this process has become evident to them *theologically*. God's Word in the New and Old Testaments is for sinners. And the entire Christian message is summarized by the fact that the sinner may be freed from sin by this Word. Is not the whole of Christian proclamation an empty undertaking if men and women are now prepared to rid themselves of sin *without* God's Word? The church's right to denote people as "sinners" has been questioned more definitely by our time than ever before.

Hence theology is compelled to undertake a critical examination of the bases of its own discourse about sin. Such an examination would have to ask whether—when viewed from the perspective of the substance of theology itself—disposing of sin apart from God's Word is not itself an essential feature of sin. And this question presupposes that we are always prepared to think afresh through the relation of God's grace and the human person.

Karl Barth met this demand in his *Church Dogmatics*. Any new theological reflection upon the nature of sin must necessarily come to terms with Barth's doctrine of nothingness and sin. Doing so is already a task in and of itself, because Barth unfolded this doctrine with such breadth throughout the entire *Church Dogmatics* that a concentrated examination and construal of his intentions is urgently required for the sake of a truly fruitful discussion.

This thoroughly critical enterprise in relation to Barth, at the same time, however, also requires an equally critical examination of the many objections to Barth's doctrine of sin. For the theological necessity and feasibility of Barth's doctrine is contested by the most diverse arguments. In the course of this contestation, a curious fact emerges: it is precisely what makes Barth's doctrine of sin interesting to us that underlies most criticism. His emphatic depiction of sin's tendency to "disappear" has drawn criticism for not taking human sin and all that belongs to it seriously, or at least not seriously enough.

This reproach can arise from either a fundamental<sup>3</sup> or conditional<sup>4</sup> rejection of Barth's entire effort to push dogmatics toward a christological concentration. But it may also merely seek to defend a type of boundary transgression in theological thinking, being itself funded by theological assumptions similar to Barth's own.<sup>5</sup> On such a view, the claim that Barth did not take sin

<sup>3</sup> As particularly in the "Lutheran" dogmatics of P. Althaus, *Die christliche Wahrheit. Lehrbuch der Dogmatik*, 6th ed. (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1962) and W. Elert, *The Christian Faith: An Outline of Lutheran Dogmatics*, trans. from 5th ed. (Columbus: Lutheran Theological Seminary, 1974).

<sup>4</sup> As in Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth*, trans. J. Drury (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), and G. C. Berkhouwer, *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956).

seriously enough is in no sense grounded on his saying *too little* regarding sin, but rather on his saying *too much*. This excessiveness is put down to the influence on Barth of German philosophical Idealism as well as Schleiermacher's theology. On such a view, Barth is in danger—on the basis of a principle of grace—of building sin into a system of theological-philosophical thinking and thus of relativizing the *historical reality* of sin.<sup>6</sup>

What remains unacknowledged by such criticism is the very *problem* of the doctrine of sin, namely that it is precisely this historical reality which is in the process of relativizing *itself*. And it is precisely this problem that should concern us. For it is quite possible that the historical reality of sin is only set forth with proper theological seriousness when its disappearing character is recognized. The "historical reality of sin" can mean something completely other than a network of sins stabilized in the world. Barth's doctrine of nothingness and sin, carried forward as it is within a christological concentration, opens our eyes to this.

The issue that Barth reflects upon here is not intended to be some sort of philosophical principle drawn from a worldview and handed over to reason. It is exclusively the *Word of God*.<sup>7</sup> But God's Word is "God himself in his revelation" attested by the New and Old Testaments.<sup>8</sup> According to Barth, God himself in his self-revelation makes sin thematic theologically. For here God *decides* about sin by reconciling the human creature to himself.

This beginning sets the course for Barth's whole doctrine of sin. Because God in Jesus Christ has decided concerning sin, there can be no doctrine of sin abstracted from this decision. The objectivity of the theological doctrine of sin is founded upon the objectivity of the doctrine of God's Word. Remarks about sin are directed by this fact. According to Barth, evaluation of the reality of sin is not decided by what sin says about itself, but rather by what God says about it in his self-revelation.

First and foremost, the *formal* consequence of this for the development of Barth's dogmatics is that there *cannot* be "an *independent, locus de peccato* to be construed in a vacuum between the doctrine of creation and that of reconcili-

<sup>5</sup> As above all in H. Vogel, "Ecce homo. Die Anthropologie Karl Barths. Referat und Gegenfrage," *Verkündigung und Forschung Theologischer Jahresbericht* 1949/50 (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1951/2), pp. 102–3; O. Weber, W. Kreck, E. Wolf, eds., *Die Predigt von der Gnadewahl. Karl Barth zum 10. Mai 1951, Theologische Existenz heute* n.s. 28 (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1951).

<sup>6</sup> So G. C. Berkhouwer, *The Triumph of Grace*, passim; G. Gloege, "Zur Prädestinationslehre Karl Barths. Fragmentarische Erwägungen über den Ansatz ihrer Neufassung," *Kerygma und Dogma* 2 (1957): 193–94.

<sup>7</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 14 vols. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956–75), I/1, pp. 78–79 (hereafter cited as CD).

<sup>8</sup> CD I/1, p. 295.

ation.”<sup>9</sup> This formal characteristic of Barth’s dogmatics does not rest merely upon the previously mentioned insight into the nature of the knowledge of sin. According to Barth, God’s decision about sin is a decision of *ontological* relevance. God’s decision does not only reveal what sin is, it decides about its being as well. But the being of sin is a *being that is negated* by God at every point. While God grants every creature its own being, God never affords an ontological place to sin.<sup>10</sup> It is determined by God to be that which is only passing away.

And yet this does not mean, for instance, that Barth disputes the actuality of sin. This is to say that, for him, sin has an actual effect exactly by virtue of its claiming a place where it does not belong at all.<sup>11</sup> In this claim it “lives and exists” as “that which is *negated*,”<sup>12</sup> as that which God has rejected and which accordingly has right neither to autonomy nor to independent significance.

And so Barth cannot and does not want to consider sin in isolation. Yet he in no way intends to render it harmless. For to think about sin “harmlessly” is precisely to construe sin’s parasitic, disappearing existence as though it were its weakness. To the contrary, we can stay on sin’s trail only when, on the basis of God’s revelation, we know that sin’s disappearance has the character of a *negating antithesis*. Precisely in its curious, disappearing way, sin exists “*in opposition* to God’s will and thus also *in opposition* to the being and destiny of His creature.”<sup>13</sup>

This, Barth’s preliminary definition of sin, directs us into two areas of his dogmatics: into the *doctrine of God* and into the *doctrine of creation*. According to Barth, both the doctrine of God and the doctrine of creation are only possible because God has revealed himself and the creature in Jesus Christ. However, revelation is the event of the reconciliation of humans with God. And it is here that the contradiction in which sin exists is set forth most sharply. Therefore the locus of the doctrine of sin within Barth’s dogmatics is the *doctrine of reconciliation*.

Nevertheless, the following investigation cannot begin with a critical rendering of the doctrine of sin set forth there. The reconciliation of humans with God is, according to Barth, no accident. God is not only faithful to his human creature in reconciliation; God also remains faithful to himself. Thus reconciliation is more than God’s compelled reaction to human sin. This is to say that in the event of reconciliation, God is acting on the basis of a “prior”

<sup>9</sup> Cf. CD IV/1, p. 141.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 139.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

decision, on the basis of his *gracious election*. God has graciously elected the human creature in Jesus Christ from all eternity. But God elected humanity in view of and in confrontation with human sin. Accordingly, God's eternal being has already been touched by sin. And accordingly, the sin's antithetical relation to God can be thought of as already existing from eternity and the nature of sin can be described on the basis of this antithetical relation. The entire *problematique* signaled herein must be considered primary.

Furthermore, according to Barth, God's electing and reconciling activity is related in a determinate way to God's activity as Creator. The human being to whom God has said "Yes" became a creature at creation. And sin befalls the creature in creation. When we speak about the being of sin, we must necessarily *differentiate* it from the being of the creature. But this means that, with Barth, we have to inquire *ontologically* about sin. As we do so, it remains presupposed that God denies sin the right even to exist in creation. Thus, the reality of sin may be described in neither an ontologically independent nor ontologically dependent way. The acknowledgment of sin and other realities that belong to sin as *Nichtiges*—*nothingness*—is an expression of this double demand. The doctrine of sin expands into a doctrine of nothingness where, on the basis of the christological approach of theology, the question of the reality of sin in relation to God and to creation *is sustained throughout*. Yet, it is exactly at this point that problems arise in Barth's work, problems that still await clarification.

The following investigation aims to contribute to this clarification. In it an attempt is made to walk critically along the path that leads from the core of Barth's thinking to his doctrine of nothingness and sin. For it would be senseless to set out an abstract outcome of this doctrine in order subsequently to criticize it.<sup>14</sup> However, by pursuing our approach, we can avoid the danger of making something autonomous that only exists within determinate and insoluble interrelations in Barth's work. At the end of this investigation these interrelations lead us to the question of the relation between the existence of human persons *reconciled* and *redeemed* and the being of sin. Consequently, problems concerning the appropriation of salvation, the overcoming of sin in the human creatures, and eschatology belong to the doctrine of sin. Finally, we will have to indicate whether Barth has been successful in dealing theologically with the contradiction that God grants human beings freedom from their sin, while nothingness and sin themselves are already in the process of vanishing (albeit, so as to corrupt the human person).

<sup>14</sup> K. Luthi proceeds in just this fashion in his *Gott und das Böse. Eine biblisch-theologische und systematische These zur Lehre vom Bösen, entworfen in Auseinandersetzung mit Schelling und Karl Barth. Studien zur Dogmengeschichte und systematischen Theologie* 13 (Zurich/Stuttgart: Zwingli-Verlag, 1961).



# I

## Knowledge of Sin and Nothingness

Prolegomena also belong to the doctrine of sin. But such prolegomena—just as, in Barth's view, with the prolegomena of dogmatics generally<sup>15</sup>—already unfold *in nuce* the substance of the theme itself. Traditionally, the chief themes of dogmatic prolegomena are questions of theological knowledge. According to Barth, however, decisions concerning these questions always presuppose that which is known. In the *Church Dogmatics*, the *ratio essendi* governs the *ratio cognoscendi* throughout. This is also the case in the doctrine of sin. For the substance of the doctrine of sin is indeed the Word of God. Consequently, we attain clarity concerning the nature of the knowledge of sin only when clarity is attained regarding that which governs the nature of theological knowledge generally. On the other hand, sin especially concerns the problem of theological knowledge because human knowers are also sinners. When they talk about God's Word they necessarily bring their own sin in train. Barth saw this sharply already in 1922. "*As ministers we ought to speak of God. But we are human, however, and so cannot speak of God.*"<sup>16</sup>

First and foremost, it is this *aporia* that must be resolved. For the possibility of theological knowledge of *sin* rests in the possibility of theological knowledge on the part of the *sinner*.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. CD I/1, pp. 26ff., 330ff.

<sup>16</sup> Barth, "The Word of God and the Task of the Ministry," in *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, trans. D. Horton (New York: Harper & Row, 1928), p. 186. Cf. the same formulation of the problem in R. Bultmann, "What Does It Mean to Speak of God?" in *Faith and Understanding* I, ed. Robert Funk, trans. L. Pettibone Smith (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), pp. 53, 58–59. (Throughout this volume, italics appear as in the original of the passage quoted, unless otherwise noted.)

THEOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE AS KNOWLEDGE  
ON THE PART OF THE SINNER

The *aporia* just mentioned was not adequately resolved by Barth in 1922. Presupposing the unbridgeable *diastase* between God and the human, all proper knowledge of God remained an "impossible possibility" for him.<sup>17</sup> Most interesting and little observed is the fact that this central concept of Barth's doctrine of sin continues to function as a description of the human situation under God's Word. The grace of God alone makes the knowledge of God possible. But sin makes it impossible.<sup>18</sup> The theologian can do nothing more than to relate this "possible" and this "impossible" to each other without delaying more than a moment in either a fixed "Yes" or a fixed "No."<sup>19</sup> But where God is really to be spoken of, God himself must speak. And this means "the *frustration* of every minister and every ministry."<sup>20</sup> The so-called "dialectical theology" was only able to correspond to God's talk of himself by way of "saying Yes-and-No," and so by way of "paradoxical" discourse. Yet, in the course of this, the God's "Yes" remains a "Yes" distant from the human creature.<sup>21</sup> And this did not change even when, in his *Christliche Dogmatik* (1927), Barth tried to answer the question about the Word of God on the basis of the questionability of the human self.<sup>22</sup>

Barth's book on Anselm brought the new point of entry. Now what God has at all times said, and not what human beings always question, becomes the point of departure for Barth's thinking. That which God has at all times said humans experience on the basis of divine revelation. Hence the knowledge of God can no longer be an impossible possibility. Rather, from now on "impossible possibility" describes sin.<sup>23</sup>

God creates knowledge of himself by making himself "objective" in Jesus Christ to human beings in the sphere of the world. God becomes an object for a knowledge applicable to him. God *can* do this. That is to say, according to Barth the power of God's "secondary objectivity," as it were, lies in that "primary objectivity" in which the triune God knows himself from eternity to eternity.<sup>24</sup> Creatures are to receive a share in this knowledge within the realm

<sup>17</sup> Cf. *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. E. C. Hoskyns (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), pp. 75, 79, 113–14, 137, et passim.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 191.

<sup>19</sup> Barth, "The Word of God and the Task of the Ministry," p. 207.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 214.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Barth's "self-critique" in CD II/1, pp. 634–35.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. K. Barth, *Die christliche Dogmatik im Entwurf*, Band I, *Die Lehre vom Worte Gottes. Prolegomena zur christliche Dogmatik* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1972).

<sup>23</sup> Cf. K. Barth, *Fides quaerens intellectum. Anselm's Proof of the Existence of God in the Context of His Theological Scheme*, trans. I. W. Robertson (London: SCM Press, 1960), p. 64.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. CD II/1, p. 48ff.

of creaturely reality. They come to share in it when in Jesus Christ God *creates* the knowing subject and thereby knowledge of himself through these subjects. God gives them faith. Faith is the "opening-up of human subjectivity *by and for* the objectivity of the divine He and in this opening-up the re-establishment and re-determination of human subjectivity."<sup>25</sup> On Barth's view, *credo ut intelligam* denotes "Christian knowledge."

Admittedly, the subject and object of the knowledge of God can never become identical for faith. It is exactly God's revelation in secondary objectivity that preserves the difference between God and the human. In this way, human persons are put in the "position of fundamental . . . *subsequence*."<sup>26</sup> For only in this position is God's gracious determination of human beings given priority over their sinful efforts to dispose over God.

There is, therefore, an *order* to the knowledge of faith. The ontic necessity and rationality which belong to the object of faith precede the noetic necessity and rationality that correspond to it.<sup>27</sup> In their precedence, ontic necessity and rationality determine the noetic in such a way that the latter becomes the correspondence of faith. God becomes knowable and expressible for sinners in the *analogia fidei*.

It becomes possible to speak of God in *human language*. For it is in language that God gave human creatures the possibility of speaking of him. Certainly, it is better not to assert with Barth a partial similarity between God's being and our words.<sup>28</sup> This assertion only too readily leaves room for the Catholic objection that the *analogia fidei* must necessarily imply the *analogia entis*.<sup>29</sup> According to this view, God and humans correspond to one another as one existent in its being to another existent in its being. And it is on this basis that knowledge of God is supposed to be possible.

In an extensive study, Eberhard Jüngel has rejected any such understanding of Barth.<sup>30</sup> The *analogia fidei* is always to be understood from *that which makes it possible*. God's gracious "Yes" *precedes* every correspondence between one entity in its being and another entity in its being. The "relation in being"

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. *Fides quaerens intellectum*, pp. 49–50.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. CD II/1, p. 227.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. G. Söhngen, "Wesen und Akt in der scholastischen Lehre von der participatio und analogia entis," *Studium Generale* 8 (1955), p. 650, as well as G. Söhngen, "Analogia entis in Analogia fidei," in *Antwort. Karl Barth zum siebzigsten Geburtstag*, ed. E. Wolf et al. (Zurich-Zollikon: Evangelischer Verlag, 1956), p. 266; Cf. also Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth*, p. 150.

<sup>30</sup> See Jüngel's "Die Möglichkeit theologischer Anthropologie auf dem Grund der Analogie. Eine Untersuchung zum Analogieverständnis Karl Barths," *Evangelische Theologie* 22 (1962), pp. 525–26 (especially pp. 542–43).

that in fact belongs to the *analogia fidei* does so because God's "Yes" ontologically constitutes the existence of human beings; it is not an independent framework for the *analogia fidei*. It rests exclusively on the "Yes" as a *verbum externum* which calls all creaturely existents into being in the first place."<sup>31</sup> "The being of the human creatures is grounded in God's 'Yes' inasmuch as this 'Yes' first grants it, like the declaration, 'it exists!' The relationship between establishing and granting governs the correspondence."<sup>32</sup> God grants a correspondence to his own being by creating human beings in such a way that they can correspond humanly to God in their being. Relationships in which humans affirm God correspond to the relationship in which the triune God affirms himself.<sup>33</sup> Only in the *event* of this *analogia proportionalitatis* can there be a correspondence between God and the human.

And so language is not part of a linguistic sphere putatively common to some degree to both God and the human.<sup>34</sup> Human beings are *themselves* in *their* language; they correspond to their nature as human beings by speaking. But this is possible because language was created by God analogically in and of itself. In it, human beings are able to correspond to themselves in such a way that they correspond to the correspondence in which God *himself* is. Human language must first of all be brought into its own essence. And this happens when *God speaks*. Without God's Word, language is devoid of essence. The essence of language *comes* into play only in the event of correspondence between God and the human creature, a correspondence that God's Word creates.

Faith preserves this characteristic of language by speaking of God in the language of the world. Certainly, in the course of so doing, all such talk of God remains perpetually plagued by sin. For sin does not follow the "household rule" that holds for talk of God.<sup>35</sup> By their sin, sinners separate language from the source of its possibility in God and scorn the "miraculous possibility" given to them in language.<sup>36</sup> "Now human language can only lose its determination" and become a "playground of . . . endlessly self-renewing mistakes and errors" and finally become speechlessness itself.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 552.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 553.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. on this below, chapter III, p. 35.

<sup>34</sup> Such an *analogia nominum* (as is asserted for example by Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption. Dogmatics*, vol. 2, trans. O. Wyon [London: Lutterworth, 1952], pp. 42–43) is nothing else than a special instance of the *analogia entis*. As such, it is the attempt to infer God from language. On this see E. Jüngel, *God's Being Is in Becoming. The Trinitarian Being of God in the Theology of Karl Barth*, trans. J. Webster (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001), pp. 17–18.

<sup>35</sup> CD II/1, p. 254; CD IV/3, p. 472.

<sup>36</sup> CD IV/3, p. 472.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

If God is to come to language in the creaturely and sinful sphere, he must win back language for itself;<sup>38</sup> God must, so to speak, raise it "from the dead."<sup>39</sup> Sinners who would speak of God remain dependent upon God, because they remain tempted by their sin. For this reason, Barth in conjunction with Anselm places decisive value on the fact that all theological work has to begin and end with prayer.<sup>40</sup>

### EXCURSUS: ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THEOLOGY AND PHILOSOPHY

Barth does not overlook the fact that all human thinking and saying is always drawn up and put together in a certain way. When it wants to speak of God, theology must also make use of philosophy.<sup>41</sup> But the question then becomes how faith's thinking is to deal with philosophy's thinking. According to Barth, the business of theology must under no circumstances be tied in principle to that of philosophy. This is precisely what Barth is suspicious of in the work of Rudolf Bultmann, for example.<sup>42</sup> However, Bultmann for his part agrees with Barth's basic position. For Bultmann, the philosophical account of human "pre-understanding" becomes thematic only "on the basis of faith."<sup>43</sup> It points to the existential structure of human existence and provides theology with a legitimate set of concepts with which to speak of humanity in its relation to God.

But Barth does not want to give precedence in principle to any one philosophy over others in theology.<sup>44</sup> Affording such precedence in principle would no longer allow the Scriptures to serve as the free criterion of their own interpretation. This explains the peculiar liberality that Barth has in his dealings with philosophical ideas and concepts. He takes up the most varied philosophical concepts and ideas, trusting the power of the object of his thinking to make distinctions and clarify matters. But as a rule he does not value them *as* philosophical ideas and concepts. Bultmann's reproach—that Barth leaves his conceptual scheme unexplained<sup>45</sup>—entails questioning whether Barth

<sup>38</sup> CD I/1, pp. 333–34.

<sup>39</sup> CD II/1, p. 231.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Barth, *Fides quaerens intellectum*, pp. 38–39; and Barth's *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction*, trans. G. Foley (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963), pp. 159–60.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. CD I/2, p. 728.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. K. Barth, "Rudolf Bultmann. An Attempt to Understand Him," in *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate*, vol. 2, ed. Hans-Werner Bartsch, trans. R. H. Fuller (London: SPCK, 1962), pp. 113–14, 120–21.

<sup>43</sup> R. Bultmann, "The Problem of 'Natural Theology,'" in *Faith and Understanding*, p. 316.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. CD I/2, p. 729ff.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. R. Bultmann, "The Problem of Hermeneutics," in *Essays, Philosophical and Theological*, trans. J. C. G. Greig (London: SCM Press, 1955), p. 260. Cf. Barth's reply in CD IV/1, p. ix.

does not, in just this way, establish the secret dominance of philosophy within theology.

If this danger is to be avoided, the *way* by which a set of philosophical concepts *becomes* theological must be shown. For our purposes, this task comes up particularly in the doctrine of nothingness.

### KNOWLEDGE OF SIN AND NOTHINGNESS AS THEOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE

It is possible to treat the principles of the knowledge of sin and nothingness in a co-ordinated train of thought. For sin is "the *concrete* form in which nothingness . . . is effective and revealed."<sup>46</sup> Hence there is only one route that leads to knowledge of them both.

Barth's thesis regarding the knowledge of sin runs as follows: knowledge of sin "comes about . . . as an element of knowledge *of God*, of the knowledge *of revelation*, and therefore of the knowledge *of faith*."<sup>47</sup> It comes about, that is, only in and through knowledge *of the gospel*.

With this axiom Barth opposes those theological approaches that ascribe knowledge of sin to knowledge gained through the law divorced from knowledge of the gospel. Barth's opposition to such views is grounded in his account of the relationship between law and gospel and the consequences that ensue therefrom. In trying to understand Barth, we do best not to proceed from his own formulation that law is the "necessary *form of the Gospel*, whose content is grace."<sup>48</sup> This is logically oblique and shaped too much by its being an alternative to the so-called "Lutheran" understanding of the relationship between law and gospel.<sup>49</sup> It makes it appear as though Barth is engaged in discussion with representatives of this "Lutheran" understanding of the relationship of law and gospel on the same plane, simply inverting the order of the terms.<sup>50</sup> But this is not the case, something the formal location that the doctrine of the law has in the *Church Dogmatics* itself makes plain.

<sup>46</sup> CD III/3, p. 305.

<sup>47</sup> CD IV/2, p. 379, cf. CD III/2, pp. 35–36; CD III/3, p. 302.

<sup>48</sup> K. Barth, "Gospel and Law," in *Community, State and Church: Three Essays*, trans. A. M. Hall (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1968), p. 80.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. G. Ebeling, "Reflections on the Doctrine of the Law," in *Word and Faith*, trans. J. W. Leitch (London: SCM, 1963), p. 267, note 1; cf. also G. Söhngen, *Gesetz und Evangelium. Ihre analoge Einheit* (Freiburg/Munich: K. Alber, 1957), pp. 27–28, which is able to reverse the determination of this relation.

<sup>50</sup> The presupposition of the so-called "Lutheran" understanding of the relation of law and gospel is the view that law and gospel are *two* words of God, distinct in themselves, although standing in a determinate relation to one another. The nature of this relation, however, is defined in different ways. For a presentation and discussion of these different positions, see my work, *Das Problem "Gesetz und Evangelium" bei W. Elert und P. Althaus, Theologische Studien* 83 (Zurich: EVZ-Verlag, 1965).

Barth develops his doctrine of law immediately following his doctrine of election. Located here, the doctrine of law explicates God's original electing will in Jesus Christ as a divine claim that awaits an answer. This claim is grounded in the fact that in his gracious election, God makes humans responsible before him in that "God makes Himself originally responsible for man."<sup>51</sup> In Jesus Christ, God has made himself primordially responsible for human beings. Thus, the law with which God makes human beings responsible before him can only be *concrete* law in Jesus Christ.

In the event of the existence of Jesus Christ, the law is related to the gospel in a primal way. For this reason, the law cannot be understood as the abstract, reverse side of the gospel, in the sense of being a claim that does not touch God himself. Rather, it is God's "sovereign, definite and good decision concerning the character of our actions."<sup>52</sup> In the law, God reiterates *for* humans what was decided in the gospel *concerning* them. Thus the *one Word* of God<sup>53</sup> is to be *differentiated* as "Gospel and Law. It is not Law by itself and independent of the Gospel. But it is also not Gospel without Law."<sup>54</sup>

Barth's christological founding of the nature of the law seems to overlook the relation of *sin and law*, which is of such decisive significance for the "Lutheran" understanding of the law. But this only appears to be the case. When Barth speaks of Jesus Christ, he has always taken human sin into consideration. The concrete law of God in Jesus Christ is directed against sin as well. But the law first receives the character of something that uncovers and accuses sin when, standing in the place of the sinner, Jesus Christ submits himself to the accusation of the law on the basis of God's election. Thus it is that women and men under the law have room freely afforded to them in which to do the one thing possible: namely, to act in *obedience* toward God.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>51</sup> CD II/2, p. 543.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 631.

<sup>53</sup> For Barth therefore, the "one Word" of God means the *event* of this Word in various trains of circumstance. G. Wingren overlooks this when he accuses Barth of postulating—with talk of one Word of God—"one content of the Word completely independent of what the Word of God wants to say to us" (see his "Evangelium und Gesetz," in E. Wolf et al., eds., *Antwort*, p. 317).

<sup>54</sup> CD II/2, p. 511. We do better not to denote the originary relatedness of law and gospel under the rubric of the "unity of law and gospel" (as does, for instance, Helmut Gollwitzer in "Zur Einheit von Gesetz und Evangelium," in E. Wolf et al., eds., *Antwort*, pp. 287–88. This fixed formula all too quickly leads ill-willed critics to accuse Barth of "legalizing" the gospel.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. CD IV/1, p. 53. Exegetically, Barth's christological grounding of the nature of the law in its relation to the gospel is chiefly oriented to the Pauline dialectic of the indicative and imperative of Christian existence (cf. CD IV/1, pp. 392–93; CD IV/2, pp. 580–81). In this way, the Pauline problem of the relation of the "law of sin" (Rom. 8:2) to the gospel seems to become a secondary problem for Barth. This is appropriate to Pauline thinking inasmuch as Paul can make the law thematic as a theological problem only on the basis of its fulfillment in Christ. But the danger in Barth's effort is that the "law of Christ" threatens to be understood in the sense of a *nova lex* when not clearly differentiated from the "law of works" (Rom. 3:27). For this reason, the problem of differentiating law and gospel must receive more strenuous consideration than it does in Barth's own work.

Nevertheless, human beings choose "the impossible which is excluded,"<sup>56</sup> that is, disobedience toward God. They do not merely offend against some sort of general claim. They offend against God's grace in Jesus Christ itself. And this act of godlessness truly is the sin and calamity of human creatures. It brings them "at once and directly into the uncomfortable sphere"<sup>57</sup> of all those laws that the "law of works" represents (Rom. 3:27). God's gracious address to humans is now reinterpreted as an instrument for the realization of our own pretensions.<sup>58</sup> "Sin is man's action in the *misunderstanding* and *misuse* of the Law" of God.<sup>59</sup> Now instead of setting forth the grace of God, the law harshly sets forth God's *wrath* upon sinners.<sup>60</sup> Under this wrath, sinners can only perish before God.<sup>61</sup> There is no way out for sinners faced with God's wrath—least of all,

... by the consideration which is theologically quite true that at bottom the righteousness of God is that of the gracious God. That is true enough. But it means nothing to man as a wrongdoer. It has no significance for him. This man has to be repaid, and repaid according to his works.<sup>62</sup>

The popular misunderstanding of Barth's doctrine of gospel and law—that it intends or must render harmless both God's wrath and human sin—trades upon a misunderstanding of the character of God's grace. God's grace does not excuse the *sin* of human persons. It is directed against this sin for their own sake. And therefore, the fact that "God is merciful to us" does not mean "that He becomes soft, but that He remains absolutely hard."<sup>63</sup> God persists in his grace by executing his judgment upon sinners.

For Barth, the harshness of this judgment is manifest by the fact that God submits himself to it.<sup>64</sup> Every other execution of judgment can only be "harmless" as compared to this judgment. Where God himself stands in for us, human persons are definitively revealed and adjudged to be sinners.<sup>65</sup> At the same time however, God's wrath is there revealed to be "purposeful

<sup>56</sup> CD II/2, p. 610.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 586.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 743.

<sup>59</sup> CD II/2, p. 590 (emphasis in original).

<sup>60</sup> Barth therefore does not leave out of account that "law and *paraclesis* . . . are two distinct, indeed opposed, things for Paul" (cf. E. Schlink, "Gesetz und Paraklese," in E. Wolf et al., eds., *Antwort*, p. 333). He not only notices this, but rather also asks with Paul how they *come to be* opposed!

<sup>61</sup> Cf. CD II/1, p. 364.

<sup>62</sup> CD IV/1, p. 364. Thus, according to these remarks of Barth, law and gospel are not the one Word of God in the same way, but in greatly different ways (contrary to Ebeling's suspicions—"Reflections on the Doctrine of the Law," in *Word and Faith*, p. 268).

<sup>63</sup> CD II/2, p. 560; cf. Barth's engagement with Ritschl's understanding of the wrath of God, CD II/1, p. 370ff.

<sup>64</sup> Cf. CD IV/1, p. 222.

<sup>65</sup> Cf. CD II/2, p. 750.

wrath,"<sup>66</sup> and his condemning law shown to be an instrument of God's love.<sup>67</sup> Given what takes place here, God's "No" to sin may be understood as a "Yes" to the human persons he has elected. Grace is the revealed mystery of that law which is terrible to sinners. The function of the law—to effect life for human beings—is fulfilled where God dies for us in the man Jesus and takes from us the guilt and punishment of our sin.<sup>68</sup>

Thus, Barth understands the relationship between law and gospel to be an *event* in which God in Jesus Christ decides first about himself and subsequently about human creatures.<sup>69</sup> For Barth, because everything regarding the significance of sin depends upon the merciful intention of God's law, the *distinction* between the (condemning) law and the gospel recedes into the background. But Barth set aside the threat of *confusing* the (condemning) law with the gospel by way of *another distinction*: the distinction between the *analogia entis* and *analogia fidei*. According to Barth, the *analogia entis* is nothing other than sinners' attempts to get a hold of God in a legal way. For this reason, in contrast to it Barth set the *analogia fidei* as the event of God's merciful conquest of humanity in Jesus Christ.

As Barth contends, human sin is shown forth in the judgment of the law fulfilled in Jesus Christ. It is here that God first recognizes sin and reveals it. All other human knowledge of sin can only follow from this knowledge.<sup>70</sup> Otherwise, sin always remains a "*harmless . . . matter*" for women and men.<sup>71</sup>

At this point the parallel that exists between Barth's distinguishing the (condemning) law from the gospel and the *analogia entis* from the *analogia fidei* becomes evident. The knowledge of Jesus Christ can only correspond to *faith*. As regards sin, faith means "to admit that we are at the end of ourselves, because God wills to make a new beginning with us and has actually done so."<sup>72</sup> It is in this admission alone that knowledge of real sin is contained. In contrast to this, two possibilities regarding knowledge of sin are ruled out. First, knowledge of sin is not identical with human *self-knowledge* independent of the gospel. Access to the knowledge that the human is a sinner "is lacking to man precisely *because* he is a sinner."<sup>73</sup> Second, no *lex naturalis*

<sup>66</sup> Cf. CD IV/1, p. 537.

<sup>67</sup> CD II/2, p. 753.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 760.

<sup>69</sup> Cf. CD II/1, pp. 373–74.

<sup>70</sup> Cf. CD III/3, p. 307, CD IV/1, p. 391.

<sup>71</sup> CD IV/1, p. 388.

<sup>72</sup> CD II/2, p. 769.

<sup>73</sup> CD IV/1, pp. 360–61. As a contrary example, cf. A. Tholuck's rule regarding the knowledge of both God and sin: "What I put at the top of the list . . . is the Delphic inscription 'Know Thyself.' Only the descent into the Hell of self-knowledge makes possible the ascent into the Heaven of the knowledge of God." (*Die Lehre von der Sünde und vom Versöhner, oder, Die wahre Weihe des Zweiflers* [Gotha: Friedrich Andreas Berthes, 1871], p. 13).

independent of the gospel leads to the knowledge of sin. In Barth's view any such *lex naturalis* would be "a product of the free speculation of the human reason and of arbitrary human imagining,"<sup>74</sup> which can never really accuse human beings. It is only a higher form in which the self confirms what it "already knows" regarding its sin.

Althaus defended himself against this reproach of Barth's by pointing to Romans 3:20.<sup>75</sup> Yet by "knowledge of sin through the law" Paul scarcely understands the knowledge of sin through a *lex naturalis* independent of the gospel. For Romans 3:25 stands in the context of Romans 1:17–3:20 and thus is clearly qualified as a retrospective statement of faith. Faith knows that all human beings under the law have become unpardonable sinners (cf. Rom. 2:1; 3:9). For the law received the function of "concluding" under sin all persons to whom God desired to show compassion (Rom. 11:32). In this situation of being "concluded in sin," knowledge of sin is no longer available to the humans. Rather, they do not recognize their sin because they endeavor to establish their own righteousness with the help of the law (cf. Phil. 3:9).

Hence, Bultmann did not interpret *ἐπιγνώσις αμαρτίας* in Romans 3:20 in the sense of "knowledge" at all, but in the sense of a self-understanding that leads to sinning.<sup>76</sup> On the contrary, Barth holds firmly to the noetic sense of this *ἐπιγνώσις*. Yet this alternative can be overcome by appeal to Paul himself. Romans 3:20 is an argument against righteousness on the basis of the law. The law is concerned that men and women—precisely in the attempt to establish their own righteousness—are shown to be sinners. It is now evident (Rom. 3:21) that the law had this function. And so Romans 3:20 can be translated: *For the law (in truth) sets forth sin as sin*. Barth rightly says of this law:

It is the law which Paul does not interpret apart from the gospel, but rather in the gospel itself and therefore authentically, as opposed to the Jewish abstraction which tries to interpret and misuse it as a direction for the achievement of one's own righteousness. It is by *this* law that there comes the knowledge of sin. It just does *not* come about from any abstract law, a conception that after all is itself a work of sin.<sup>77</sup>

<sup>74</sup> CD IV/1, pp. 363–64.

<sup>75</sup> Cf. "Durch das Gesetz kommt Erkenntnis der Sünde. Zur Auseinandersetzung mit der exklusiv-christologischen Dogmatik," in P. Althaus, *Um die Wahrheit des Evangeliums. Aufsätze und Vorträge* (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1962), pp. 168–69.

<sup>76</sup> Cf. R. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, trans. K. Grobel (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955), p. 264. Cf. also his "Römer 7 und die Anthropologie des Paulus," in *Exegetica: Aufsätze zur Erforschung des Neuen Testaments*, ed. E. Dinkler (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1967), p. 200.

<sup>77</sup> CD IV/1, p. 395.

For Barth, it follows from this that in the mirror of this law, sin can only appear as that which it *has been*. In faith "sin that is *known* is forgiven as such."<sup>78</sup> Only this sin is real sin.

Given the developed axioms of a knowledge of sin bound to the knowledge of Jesus Christ, it becomes clear why Barth has to traverse new and unusual paths in his doctrine of sin and nothingness. He always tries to take nothingness and sin seriously to the extent to which they are taken seriously by God himself in his revelation. To sustain this approach to the knowledge of sin is not simple.<sup>79</sup> We must keep the following points in mind whenever we speak of sin and nothingness: We must attend, first, to the way God is gracious to human beings; second, to the way God in his revelation has confronted nothingness and sin; third, to the way nothingness and sin direct themselves against God and human creatures in this confrontation; fourth, to the way, apart from this confrontation, nothingness and sin conceal their character; and finally, to the way God, in the confrontation with nothingness and sin, differentiates nothingness and sin from his creatures.

<sup>78</sup> CD II/2, p. 768.

<sup>79</sup> According to Barth, just how serious this insight is is decided in whether a dogmatics is in a position, within the overall framework of the dogmatic outline, to sustain the insight that there can only be knowledge of sin on the basis of the gospel. F. Schleiermacher and later A. Ritschl in their own ways begin from this insight in their doctrines of sin. But within the framework of his presentation of the facts of the pious self-consciousness sin, for Schleiermacher, remains a mere deficiency of the God-consciousness (cf. §66ff. of *The Christian Faith*, ed. H. R. Mackintosh, trans. J. S. Stewart [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1900], p. 271). And Ritschl understood the "Kingdom of God" that defines sin in relation to sin as an ethical norm. Therefore, within the overall framework of his specific doctrine of the total sin of the human, Ritschl only wanted to speak of the act of sin as an ethical failure (cf. *The Christian Doctrine of Justification and Reconciliation. The Positive Development of the Doctrine*, ed. H. R. Mackintosh, trans. A. B. Macaulay [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1900], p. 327ff.). After Ritschl, the assertion that the knowledge of sin is only possible on the basis of the revelation of Jesus Christ nearly becomes a kind of commonplace, which finds a place in the most widely varied theological programs (cf. E. Troeltsch, *The Christian Faith*, ed. G. von le Fort, trans. Garrett E. Paul [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991], p. 260ff.; Theodor Haering, *Der christliche Glaube. Dogmatik*, 2nd ed. [Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1912], p. 326; J. Kaftan, *Dogmatik*, 5th/6th ed. [Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1909], p. 335). This approach is not usually to be found again among the outcomes of the doctrine of sin.



## II

### God and Nothingness

#### THE MEANING OF THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN NOTHINGNESS AND SIN

Barth's formulation—that human sin is a “concrete form” of nothingness<sup>80</sup>—requires interpretation. If it were understood in isolation it would follow that nothingness would be the general form of that concrete instance. On this presupposition, it would then be the cardinal task of the doctrine of nothingness to come to know and to describe the concrete shape of nothingness. One would then have to derive a general nature from these instances of nothingness. And this would be *das Nichtige*—nothingness.<sup>81</sup>

But once again the principles of knowledge—described above—that Barth intends to follow in the doctrine of nothingness contravene this way of arriving at conclusions. According to these principles, nothingness should be understood on the basis of what is actually concrete for theological thinking. In the *Church Dogmatics*, “concrete” is a theologically loaded term. Barth understands Jesus Christ to be the original representative of all concreteness. Thus, everything that owes its existence to the “Yes” spoken to creation in Jesus Christ can only, on the basis of the *analogia fidei*, become concrete in the sphere of creation as well.

Thus, as the contradiction of this “Yes,” human sin is per se that which is *without* concreteness.<sup>82</sup> At most, it can arrogate concreteness to itself. In this

<sup>80</sup> Cf. CD III/3, p. 305.

<sup>81</sup> It was in this way that Plotinus distinguished a “primary evil” from a “secondary evil,” cf. below chapter III, p. 54.

<sup>82</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar clearly acknowledged the theological character of the concepts “abstract” and “concrete.” The human person is *in concreto* as God's covenant partner. The sinner is *in abstracto* (cf. *The Theology of Karl Barth*, pp. 247–48).

way sin and other forms of nothingness appear to be precisely what they actually are not within the realm of creation. As a consequence, to draw conclusions about the *essentia* of sin as nothingness on the basis of the phenomenon of sin would mean failing to recognize the true nature of sin.

Barth distinguishes between nothingness and its forms differently and on other grounds. Sin, death, and evil are not isolated phenomena.<sup>83</sup> Thus, in Scripture, human sin "without detriment to the full responsibility of the human being for its happening is always also described as the creature's defeat by the foreign power" of the "*enemy*."<sup>84</sup> On the cross of Christ, opposition to God's grace is shown to be greater than sin alone. Human persons are serving a power arrayed against God which stands behind them. Barth calls this power nothingness.

So it is the reality of revelation which makes it necessary for Barth to speak of nothingness. For Barth, not to know nothingness means not to know the reality of revelation, for in revelation God rushes to the aid of human beings against the *foreign power* which is overpowering them.<sup>85</sup> "When God is angry at sin, God is angry towards this his *true* enemy who is also the enemy of the human."<sup>86</sup>

According to Barth, this enemy acts against God and human creatures in differing ways, dimensions, or forms. In my view, this should be understood to mean that nothingness necessarily assumes different forms in correspondence with the objects it encounters. When it breaks into creation, it clothes itself with the being of creation, as it were, such that its different forms come about. Its character as nothingness has varied effects as sin, death, and evil. But in each of these forms it is the *whole* nothingness. It is never more or less nothing. Yet by virtue of making itself felt in *different* forms, nothingness causes human persons subject to it to be incapable of understanding it as a *single* nothingness. However, "at the heart of the gospel," Jesus Christ revealed the "*whole* scope" of the single power of nothingness.<sup>87</sup>

Hence in Barth's view, nothingness is not the abstract essence of sin. If Barth nonetheless arrives at a determination of the nature of nothingness, this does not emerge from pursuing a path of abstraction from sin. It is oriented solely to the concrete event of God's grace in Jesus Christ. On the basis of that event, nothingness is entitled to no ontological place whatsoever. Thus,

<sup>83</sup> This, above all else, sets Barth in opposition to J. Müller's account, cf. *CD* III/3, pp. 312–13.

<sup>84</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 310.

<sup>85</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 311–12.

<sup>86</sup> *CD* IV/2, p. 225; cf. *CD* III/2, p. 143.

<sup>87</sup> Cf. *CD* III/3, pp. 311–12.

Barth's doctrine of nothingness lacks any "space" into which the nature of nothingness could be abstracted.

Admittedly, Barth did not differentiate as explicitly as we have here between the definition of the nature of nothingness and the distinction between nothingness and its forms. But this must be done in order to fend off the erroneous interpretation previously mentioned.

#### NOTHINGNESS AS GOD'S OWN PROBLEM

For Barth, the theological concept of nothingness as a whole depends upon the fact "that the primal antitheses or encounter in which it has its being is its confrontation with God himself."<sup>88</sup> God became embroiled in this primal antithesis to nothingness neither by fate nor by accident. For God's revelation in Jesus Christ manifests him in an action which he "had *already* begun *from the very beginning*."<sup>89</sup> This action is the eternal election of the human being in Jesus Christ. The primal encounter with nothingness takes place on the basis of this election.

This primal encounter occurs within the framework of the concrete event of the being of Jesus Christ which can be known only in revelation. Consequently, everything we can say concerning God's primal encounter with nothingness can only be said from our viewing it as a whole "as we view the living person of Jesus Christ."<sup>90</sup> Nothing in God's eternal election has a "*background . . . which might be something other than God's revelation*, something other than the eternal Word, Jesus Christ himself."<sup>91</sup> Hence, God's primal encounter with nothingness owes itself to the "primal decision" that God concretely made in Jesus Christ.<sup>92</sup>

God's primal decision in Jesus Christ is the "beginning . . . of all the ways and works of God."<sup>93</sup> This beginning consists in the fact that God "determines himself for sinful man and sinful man for Himself."<sup>94</sup> Such definition has nothing to do with the abstract idol of a *decretum absolutum*.<sup>95</sup> Jesus Christ—true God and true human—is the electing God and the elected human person in one.<sup>96</sup> On the basis of God's election in Jesus Christ, God and

<sup>88</sup> CD III/3, p. 360.

<sup>89</sup> CD IV/1, p. 36.

<sup>90</sup> CD II/2, p. 180.

<sup>91</sup> K. H. Miskotte, *Über Karl Barths Kirchliche Dogmatik. Kleine Präludien und Phantasien. Theologische Existenz heute* n.s. 89 (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1961), p. 53.

<sup>92</sup> Cf. CD II/2, pp. 8, 53, 55 et passim.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., p. 93.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., p. 94.

<sup>95</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 143; cf. pp. 115, 103.

<sup>96</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 94ff. On the consequences for the relations in God's being "*ad intra*" and "*ad extra*" which arise from this, cf. E. Jüngel, *God's Being Is in Becoming*, p. 83ff.

humans are primally together. This "being together" is the *covenant* that God has already entered into with human beings in God's pretemporal eternity.

The "primal history" of this covenant leads directly to the God's primal encounter with nothingness.<sup>97</sup> For the humans whom God elected in accordance with his revelation are *sinners*.<sup>98</sup> God makes the destiny of these sinners his own by electing them. God would "rather be unblest with His creature than be the blessed God of an unblest creature."<sup>99</sup> For this reason in Jesus Christ God puts himself in the place of sinful humanity. God *ascribes* to humans "election, salvation and life; and to Himself He has ascribed . . . reprobation, perdition and death."<sup>100</sup> Thereby God hazards divinity itself, with its power and status: "For man it means an infinite gain, an unheard of advancement, that God should give Himself to him as his own possession, that God should be his God. But for God it means inevitably a certain compromising of Himself . . . Where man stands only to gain, God stands only to lose."<sup>101</sup>

For this reason nothingness is "primarily and properly God's own affair."<sup>102</sup> To assert that God stands in opposition to nothingness more or less uninvolved is, according to Barth, a false doctrine.<sup>103</sup> Because God elects the human creature, God in fact allows himself to be problematized by nothingness.

The doctrine of nothingness must begin with this proposition. When this is acknowledged, one of the chief objections raised against Barth time and again in various forms is sapped of its strength. Many object that Barth wants to "explain" nothingness. In particular, the *supralapsarian* starting point of his doctrine of election fosters this charge, as it purportedly blocks the way to honoring "the *decisiveness* of history."<sup>104</sup> If nothingness is supposed to be a reality for the eternal God, then Barth must make clear how nothingness

<sup>97</sup> Cf. CD II/2, p. 8.

<sup>98</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 161ff.

<sup>99</sup> CD III/3, p. 358; Cf. also CD II/2, pp. 161–68; CD IV/1, pp. 71, 176, 410; CD IV/2, p. 401; CD IV/3, p. 410.

<sup>100</sup> CD II/2, pp. 162–63.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> CD III/3, p. 354.

<sup>103</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 360—Barth's chief objection to the most prominent conceptions of the doctrine of sin and evil since the eighteenth century is that in them this false doctrine was given space. But it is surprising that Barth in his historical excursus (pp. 312–49) does not speak of Hegel or Schelling, in whose work the idea of God's self-engagement against nothingness plays a decisive role. Behind the theological dubiety of these ideas in the systems of German Idealism is hidden an insight from which Barth himself learned a great deal. It is the insight that God's greatness can in no way be set forth adequately on the basis of a Platonic axiom of apathy. On the penetration of this axiom into the doctrine of God, cf. W. Elert, *Der Ausgang der altkirchlichen Christologie. Eine Untersuchung über Theodor von Pharan und seine Zeit. Aus dem Nachlaß*, eds. W. Maurer and E. Bergsträsser (Berlin: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1957), p. 71ff. On G. C. Berkouwer's criticism of Barth's "theopaschitism," see E. Jüngel, *God's Being Is in Becoming*, p. 94, note 77.

<sup>104</sup> Cf. G. C. Berkouwer, *The Triumph of Grace*, p. 255.

becomes this. Somehow he must speak of the "emergence" of nothingness or of its "being allowed" by God. But this—so it is held—would be speculation.

On the contrary, according to Barth it is the infralapsarian doctrine which more often than not is speculative. For such a doctrine necessarily severs God's purpose for creation from God's purpose for redemption in order subsequently to bring them both together with the help of so-called "natural theology"—depending upon the view.<sup>105</sup> However, when the elected *homo labilis* is Jesus Christ—as in Barth's work—a supralapsarian approach is protected from the danger of speculative construction. Jesus is the authentic witness to what God positively "is and wills," but also to what God "is *not* and *does not* will."<sup>106</sup> Therefore the supralapsarian approach of the doctrine of election is adequate to revelation. It does not project sin into eternity; rather, it explains the path to the cross that Jesus Christ took for us as a path that God had intended from all eternity. In this way it powerfully augments the decisive significance of Jesus' path, teaching us to understand the history of this path as the "sum of the gospel."<sup>107</sup>

So it is that the whole question of the explicability or inexplicability of nothingness is excluded as a primary perspective from the doctrine of nothingness. The problems which ensue from this "questioning back behind"—such as, for instance, "what is a human being?" or "whence comes evil?"<sup>108</sup>—are carried over "from outside."<sup>109</sup> They attempt to raise the problem of nothingness outside the context in which God himself has placed it. The question can, in fact, only remain in this context if it is approached christologically.

In this way, any "explanation" of nothingness—in the sense of rendering it rationally transparent—is ruled out altogether. Yet just what nothingness is all about will very likely become *clear*. For if God allows himself to be

<sup>105</sup> Cf. CD II/2, p. 127ff.; K. Barth, *Gottes Gnadenwahl, Theologische Existenz heute* 47 (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1936), pp. 43–44.

<sup>106</sup> CD II/2, p. 141.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>108</sup> Cf. J. Gross, *Geschichte des Erbsündendogmas. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Problems vom Ursprung des Übels*, Band I: *Von der Bibel bis Augustinus* (Munich/Basel: E. Reinhardt, 1960), p. 73.

<sup>109</sup> Cf. Barth's fundamental rejection of all questions concerning nothingness which are posed "abstractly, from outside, as it were" (CD III/3, p. 365). Even a "creative interpretation" of the problem of evil, such as that proposed by Paul Ricoeur ("Hermeneutik der symbole und philosophisches Denken," in *Kerygma und Mythos* VI/1, ed. H. W. Bartsch, Hamburg: Evangelische Verlag, 1956, p. 44ff.) can, for Barth, only prove helpful if it measures the traditional symbols of evil against the reality revealed in Jesus Christ. But this does not come clear in Ricoeur's work. For Ricoeur understands insight into the problem of evil as a path of thinking that alternates between the possibilities of contemplative (ethical) and speculative reflection on evil. This move leads to the insight that "the opposition of both ways of thinking is overcome in the miracle of the Logos, and evil is subsequently set in the brightness of being on that basis" (p. 68).

problematized even by nothingness, then he certainly does *not leave* the problem of nothingness *undecided*.

This is to say that God does not give himself away to this nothingness when he takes human sin upon himself. Even in the most profound difficulty, God can *remain* God for the sake of his creatures. Because God is able to do this, a decision has already been taken regarding nothingness in God's primal decision for humanity. Nothingness is not a kind of "anti-god," with whom God has to contend in a mysterious way.<sup>110</sup> In Jesus Christ, we can only know nothingness as "something which has already been overcome, something which yields, something which has been destroyed."<sup>111</sup> But what it "is in Jesus Christ . . . [it is] also in the beginning with God."<sup>112</sup> To this extent, as God's own problem the problem of nothingness is *decided* from the outset. This also explains why, despite the otherwise *formally* concurrent construction of the doctrine of election and the doctrine of reconciliation within the *Church Dogmatics*, there is not one single paragraph in the doctrine of election concerning nothingness and sin.<sup>113</sup> Within the architecture of his dogmatics, Barth develops the insight that nothingness is not something concurrent and equally valued alongside the grace of God. God is already the victor from all eternity; God does not first have to become this!<sup>114</sup>

Barth's critics, however, call this rendering the historical contingency of evil *harmless*, or, in a word, *monism*.<sup>115</sup> What they mean by such terms is that Barth teaches a kind of *decretum absolutum* in a christological form, one which he builds on the basis of a *principle* of grace. Barth defended himself vigorously against this criticism by pointing to the *living person* of the victor Jesus, who does not allow any "Christ-principle" to make demands upon him.<sup>116</sup> Furthermore, in his *doctrine of the Trinity*, Barth *thought* of God's existence as living, as an existence at movement within itself in such a way that for him the concept "God" can only designate a free event which is not set at our disposal.<sup>117</sup> The doctrine of the Trinity shows to what extent God is the "inscrutable subject" of the event of reconciliation and for this reason eludes every attempt at objectivization.<sup>118</sup> As such, God has already anticipated

<sup>110</sup> Cf. CD II/2, p. 90.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., p. 172.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 94ff., §§33–35.

<sup>114</sup> Cf. CD IV/3, p. 173ff.

<sup>115</sup> For example, cf. P. Althaus, "Durch das Gesetz kommt Erkenntnis der Sünde. Zur Auseinandersetzung mit der exklusiv-christologischen Dogmatik," p. 168ff.; Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth*, p. 277.

<sup>116</sup> Cf. CD IV/3.1, p. 173ff.

<sup>117</sup> On this cf. CD I/1, p. 295ff.

<sup>118</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 384ff.

every principle which would lay claim to him, even a principle of grace. In the three modes of existing as Father, Son, and Spirit, the triune God is the "one who is ours *in going ahead of us*."<sup>119</sup>

Barth considers the event of God's "going ahead of us" in the doctrine of election. For only in this way can God really be spoken of in it. The freedom of God's being does not consist in a bewildering unintelligibility.<sup>120</sup> The event of God's being is aimed concretely at human beings, affirming them and awakening them "to individuality and autonomy."<sup>121</sup> This awakening is neither a monologue within God, nor something self-evident to humans. It is the real "history of an obstacle and its removing; the history of a death and a resurrection; the history of a judgment and a pardon, the history of a defeat and a victory."<sup>122</sup> God decided concerning *this* history in eternity. And in the course of this history, the cross is that place where the decision is made concerning nothingness. Never before had nothingness acquired greater historical contingency. It was permitted to violate God himself; it rendered God himself problematic. But in a life and death struggle, God decided on nothingness. Because Barth regards nothingness as a problem that God has resolved *from the cross*, it is rash to reproach Barth for making sin "harmless."

Moreover, for *human beings*, nothingness remains the primal threat to which their existence is subject. Where this occurs, men and women are distant from God. In relation to God's mercy there is nothing which is "self-evident, obvious or matter-of-course."<sup>123</sup> Even here, everything hangs upon the *free event* of God's grace.

From all of this, we arrive at the following axioms regarding the doctrine of nothingness: First, human creatures are always already *subject* to nothingness; second, for this reason God allows himself to be *problematized* by nothingness; third, God remains *superior* to nothingness even in its most profound difficulty nonetheless; fourth, the power of nothingness must therefore be "estimated" to be both "as weak as possible with respect to God," and "as great as possible with respect to the human creature."<sup>124</sup> This assessment of the power antagonistic to both God and his human creatures expresses the *terminus* of nothingness.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., p. 385.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., p. 190.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., p. 180.

<sup>122</sup> CD II/2, p. 141.

<sup>123</sup> CD IV/3.1, pp. 179–80.

<sup>124</sup> CD III/3, p. 295.

## GOD'S "YES" AND "NO"

The term "nothingness" does not generally belong to the terminology the ecclesiastical tradition deploys from Scripture to designate that reality set in opposition to God. Barth himself coined it from his knowledge of the matter.<sup>125</sup> But the issue at stake here is an apparently dialectical fact: in Jesus Christ God says *Yes* to creation; at the same time with this *Yes*, God says *No* to the foreign power that strives against him and his creation. When God *will*s the creature, he negates everything that he does not *will*. Hence, talk about nothingness has its place in Barth's theology in the relationship between God's *Yes* and *No*.

But Barth did not speak of this relationship as clearly as it may appear in relation to the overall cadence of the *Church Dogmatics*. In particular, Barth speaks of God's *No* in a distinctive sense.

First, Barth speaks of God's *No* regarding *human creatures* in a way that maintains the *graceful intention* of God's wrath.<sup>126</sup> God says *No* to *sinners* only in order to be merciful to them. For this reason God himself becomes the human person on whom his wrath is brought to bear in the stead of all other human beings. The *No* spoken in election of human creatures is, on all accounts, therefore "not a *No* that strikes the human."<sup>127</sup>

Yet, as regards *sin* and the other forms of nothingness, Barth goes on to speak of an "unconditional *No* against . . . this element. It is a *No* without a concealed *Yes*."<sup>128</sup> This *No* is related to God's *Yes* only insofar as God says *Yes* to human beings *against* their sin. It is the intention of this *No* to *destroy* sin.

When, lastly, Barth speaks of the *No* that God says to nothingness in *eternity*, then, in contrast to our second point, he says not only that the sphere of nothingness *passes away* under God's *No*, but also that it in fact *becomes* this passing sphere.<sup>129</sup> Without God's *No* it simply would not exist as an *assigned* sphere.

Barth wants to prevent evil from becoming an independent theme in or alongside God.<sup>130</sup> A dualism between God and nothingness is ruled out because God's *Yes* stands at the beginning of all things. For this reason, Barth maintains that nothingness receives "a kind of possibility and reality of existence" that God does not will it to have.<sup>131</sup> Of course this is only that "of the

<sup>125</sup> Cf. *CD* IV/3.1, p. 177.

<sup>126</sup> Cf. *CD* II/2, p. 3ff., 491ff.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 166.

<sup>128</sup> *CD* IV/1, p. 409.

<sup>129</sup> Cf. *CD* II/2, p. 170.

<sup>130</sup> *Contra* Berkouwer, *The Triumph of Grace*, p. 258.

<sup>131</sup> *CD* II/2, p. 170; Barth does not teach a "primal dualism" on the basis of an eternal self-differentiation in God (*contra* Berkouwer, *The Triumph of Grace*, p. 220). Rather, God differenti-

impossible, the reality of existence only that of the *unreal*, the autonomous power only that of *impotence*.”<sup>132</sup> God could not have “willed and elected” the human “without *also* willing and choosing its shadow, without *conceding* to and *creating* for that shadow . . . an existence as something yielding and defeated.”<sup>133</sup>

The question is: does talk of the “emergence” of nothingness still have a basis in revelation? Heinrich Vogel has raised this question. For Vogel, moving solely from revelation we are forbidden to ask the question about the *whence* of sin. For even in the knowledge of reality rendered clear by God’s clarity, there always remains an *eschatological reservation* which forces sinners into paradoxical talk about this reality. So, according to Vogel, all sinners’ knowledge stands under the confession that “from eternity to eternity” God is “*the Lord*” of the *mystery*—still hidden from sinners—of the knowledge of the divine transcendence of good and evil.<sup>134</sup> Therefore, in accordance with revelation, evil can only be comprehended by *forgoing* explanation of its *whence*. To forgo explanation in this way, for example, allows sin to become

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ates his eternity from nothingness, by excluding the latter from himself. This is not a differentiation in God’s being, but rather between God and nothingness. Contrary to this, Schelling taught a kind of eternal self-differentiation of God from evil within the being of God. He postulated in God two equally eternal principles: God as that which exists, and God as the “ground of existence” (cf. “Philosophische Untersuchung Über das Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit und der damit zusammenhängenden Gegenstände,” in *Schellings Werke*, Band 4 [Munich: Beck, 1927], p. 249). “God’s will is to universalize everything, to raise everything into unity with the light, or to preserve it therein; but the will of the Ground, is to particularize everything or make everything creaturely” (p. 273). Thereby is given the possibility for the emergence of evil. The human can turn this will of the Ground toward creation (which is not evil in itself) into selfhood independent from and against God (p. 281). God neither willed or took up into his resolution this evil (cf. p. 294). But it is necessary for the revelation of God, since without evil God himself would not be anything (cf. p. 295). Evil must exist for God to become all in all (cf. p. 300). On the problem of interpreting Schelling, cf. K. Lüthi, *Gott und das Böse*, pp. 16–64. From the differentiation of the pure attributes of God, Lüthi himself wants to make fruitful once more the thesis concerning the eternal self-differentiation in God to which evil owes its existence. Though in the course of this—*contra* Barth—he allows evil to be grounded in a primal position. God casts evil down “from his height” (p. 275). Barth, however, does *not* mean this.

<sup>132</sup> CD II/2, p. 170; Barth’s train of thought as such is not new. F. Schleiermacher advanced a view of God’s role as the originator of sin which at least comes close to that of Barth. Schleiermacher asserted that God’s “commanding will” actually did *not* will sin. Yet, nevertheless, sin is ordered by the “creating will” of God as “that which makes redemption necessary” (Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, §83). As a result, the capacity for redemption is, at the same time, preserved in the God-consciousness. In this way, there can only be sin in relation to redemption. Evil is “everywhere only in relation to the good . . . and sin only in relation to grace” (§80). According to Barth, because he understood this entire process of the emergence of sin solely as an “exclusively *subjective* process,” Schleiermacher at this point perpetrates a “great theological disaster” (cf. CD III/3, pp. 327–28).

<sup>133</sup> CD II/2, p. 170.

<sup>134</sup> Cf. H. Vogel, *Gott in Christo. Ein Erkenntnisgang durch die Grundprobleme der Dogmatik* (Berlin: Lettner, 1951), p. 942.

recognizable as "what absolutely should not have and could not have happened. It is . . . that which is impossible given God's being and nature."<sup>135</sup>

This notable objection helps us to identify more precisely what concerns Barth. We have seen that his concern is not an abstract explanation of the *whence* of nothingness. Barth only confirms that nothingness is there *de facto* where God reveals himself. It is there *de facto* under God's No and in no other manner. However, since God's "not-willing" is not a determinate dialectical form of his willing,<sup>136</sup> one can say without further ado that nothingness *becomes* in that God does not will it. Under God's No, even in eternal election, God's beginning with nothingness *can never be a becoming*, rather *only an assignation*.

For this reason, we might think of a decision to renounce any explanation of nothingness as indicative of *God's own* contemptuous renunciation of nothingness. Nothingness is essentially inexplicable because God himself did not explain it. Thus, in Barth's work nothingness is also called an "impossible possibility," an "ontological impossibility," "the absolutely abnormal and vacuous," "that which is repulsive in itself," "the absurd," and "the essence that which is without essence."<sup>137</sup> God's own renunciation of an explanation of nothingness has condemned nothingness to "exist" in this way. Barth wants to take seriously this judgment about nothingness while yet avoiding making it into a component of a system.

By contrast, both monism and dualism would lead to an inadmissible systematizing of nothingness. *Both* of these paths ought to be barred by the proposition that nothingness *is* insofar as God does *not* will it. It is not something independent, alongside God apart from God's will. For there is a divine "not-willing" only because God wills the creation. But nothingness does not exist on the basis of God's will. God does not grant it any becoming, but rather only condemns it to exist in dissolution.

If, on the basis of this presupposition, Barth speaks of God's "allowing" nothingness,<sup>138</sup> this is the final consequence of his thinking in accord with revelation. It expresses that God's confrontation with nothingness should be understood as having been *endured* by God for the sake of creation. In no way does such an "allowing" constitute an injustice against creation. From the outset, God willed to allow the entirety of the threat and affliction in which nothingness entangles men and women to be his own threat and affliction.<sup>139</sup> The abstract question as to why God did not elect human creatures without this confrontation thus becomes meaningless. When Barth speaks of

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., p. 473.

<sup>136</sup> Cf. CD II/2, p. 170.

<sup>137</sup> Cf. CD III/3, pp. 354–55.

<sup>138</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 360ff.

<sup>139</sup> Cf. CD II/2, p. 165.

God's "allowing" nothingness, he adheres not to empty possibilities but to the reality of God's action.<sup>140</sup> This does not "explain" the *whence* of nothingness.<sup>141</sup> But the boundary is drawn from which nothingness must be thought of as inexplicable.

A difficulty does arise at this point. Barth must indeed describe the indescribable nothingness that *exists* in a definite way under God's No. Yet the categories available to him for such a description are only those which describe creaturely existence within the sphere of creation. But this sphere owes itself to God's Yes, a Yes to which nothingness does not in any way owe itself. For instance, its becoming has nothing to do in any way whatsoever with the coming into being of creation. And yet Barth has no other categories at his disposal with which to describe the intended state of affairs. He thus describes nothingness with creaturely categories even though it does not belong to creaturely reality and may not be understood in analogy to it.

That this is not always clear in Barth's *Dogmatics* is a shortcoming we ought not to overlook. The fact that this shortcoming, so far as I see it, has not yet become a topic of investigation demonstrates in an exemplary way how isolated Barth has remained in thinking through his doctrine of nothingness.

The task is now to describe the "being" of nothingness with ontological categories in such a way that it cannot be confused with creation. Nothingness can only be thought of in distinction from creation if thought of in ontological negations. However, in so doing one must always be careful that it has its "being" not only on the basis of the negation of creation, but also on the basis of the negation of the Creator.<sup>142</sup>

<sup>140</sup> Accounting for the emergence of nothingness is definitely not merely a kind of "linguistic necessity" for Barth *qua* dogmatician (as claimed in G. Rödding, "Das Seinsproblem in der Schöpfungslehre Karl Barths," *Kerygma und Dogma* 10 [1964], p. 29). It takes into account the real conditions under which nothingness "is" and simply rules out all speculation about *whence*.

<sup>141</sup> H. G. Pöhlmann's interpretation of Barth would represent such an explanation (*Analogia entis oder analogia fidei? Die Frage der Analogie bei Karl Barth, Forschungen zur systematischen und ökumenischen Theologie* 16 [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1965, p. 50]). From Barth's formulation—that nothingness is a "real correspondence" to God's No (CD III/3, p. 352), Pöhlmann concluded that "God *really* negates nothingness, nothingness is a *real* analogy to God . . . just the No and the negation are analogous . . . so God and nothingness correspond to each other, in that they contradict each other." This interpretation stands Barth's intention on its head. It claims that God in his analogical action powerfully willed nothingness. Yet the concept of "correspondence" here has absolutely nothing to do with Barth's understanding of analogy. It need only be said that God's "No" does not remain without effect, without results. Pöhlmann's erroneous interpretation indicates in an exemplary way the shortcoming of his entire book, interested as it is in only the abstract *concept* of analogy in Barth's work.

<sup>142</sup> This is to say that otherwise the danger exists that a certain—or even total—power of disposal over nothingness will be erroneously granted to the human creature. For J. P. Sartre, for

### EXCURSUS: HEGEL'S VIEW OF EVIL COMPARED WITH BARTH'S DOCTRINE OF NOTHINGNESS

The suspicion has often been expressed that Barth's method of thinking may be a "purely idealistic method" and that the spirit of his *Dogmatics* may breathe the "spirit of Hegel."<sup>143</sup> It makes itself felt particularly with respect to Barth's doctrine of nothingness. This makes it necessary to stage a short confrontation between Barth's theological approach and Hegel's view of evil. For Hegel's presentation we will essentially limit ourselves to the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*.<sup>144</sup>

Hegel was clear about from whence to attack the problem of evil. That is to say, he intended to know that region "in which all the enigmas of the world are solved."<sup>145</sup> In Hegel this region is called the *absolute Spirit*. It is the event of thinking in its pure form always already having encompassed in itself all the antitheses of the world and of thought. It is what is "the True in thought,"<sup>146</sup> the Idea [*Idee*], which is as such identical to God. And Hegel aspires to apprehend God by thinking the "nature of God as grasped by thought."<sup>147</sup> To this extent, God is for him "the result of philosophy."<sup>148</sup>

Of course philosophy does not create God. Rather, it proves God as *a concrete event*. The concreteness of God's being consists in the fact that it is "*posited as divided in itself*." Both sides of the division are "*opposed characteristics of thought*," and the Idea must be conceived of as the unity of these."<sup>149</sup> Consequently, "to think speculatively" means "to resolve anything real into its parts, and to oppose these to each other in such a way that the distinctions are set in opposition in accordance with the characteristics of thought, and the object is apprehended as a unity of the two."<sup>150</sup> Hegel's "dialectical method"

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example, the human being is that one "by which nothingness comes to things" (*Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. H. E. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), p. 22. But it is exactly in discovering and overcoming nothingness that humans find their actuality. They master nothingness in order to be transcendent (*ibid.*). On this matter, cf. Barth's conversation with Sartre in CD III/3, p. 338ff.

<sup>143</sup> Cf. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Karl Barth. Darstellung und Deutung seiner Theologie* (Cologne: Verlag Jakob Hegner, 1962), p. 218. [The English abridgment omits this remark.—Trans.].

<sup>144</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, 3 vols., translated from the second German edition by E. B. Speirs and J. B. Sanderson. (Reprint, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968.) [This edition of Hegel's *Lectures* corresponds to that which Krötke himself uses—*Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion*. Bände 1–2, in *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. H. Glockener, Bände 15–16, 3rd ed. (Stuttgart: F. Frommann, 1959)—Trans.]

<sup>145</sup> Hegel, *Lectures*, vol. 1, p. 83.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*

conceives the absolute Spirit as a living process. This process consists in breaking the absolute concept into its otherness and the sublation of the separation in reconciliation.<sup>151</sup> Within this process, the problem of evil becomes a theme within the sphere of the Spirit's being-other-to-itself. In the philosophy of religion, this realm is called the "kingdom of the Son"<sup>152</sup> as distinct from the original "kingdom of the Father"<sup>153</sup> and from the final "kingdom of the Spirit."<sup>154</sup>

The Son is the "primal division" [*Ur-Teil*] of the Idea. It is true of him "that he exists as a *free* personality, independently or for Himself, that he appears as something real outside of and apart from God, as something, in fact, which actually is."<sup>155</sup> Of course this "Being of the world" is determined from the outset "to have" only "a moment of Being" in order to return once again to its "source . . . a relationship of Spirit or Love."<sup>156</sup> This twofold determinateness of the other of the Idea is expressed by the fact that the temporal world is in itself split up "into the natural world and into the world of finite Spirit."<sup>157</sup> The twofold characterization of the human follows from this: first, "the human being is *by nature good*," and second, "the human being is *by nature evil*."<sup>158</sup> Human beings are *good* insofar as they are "potentially Spirit, rationality . . . created in the image of God."<sup>159</sup> They are *evil* insofar as in human nature—as a finite Spirit—there is always a determination "to pass out . . . into a state in which there is a separation of [their] notion or conception and [their] immediate existence."<sup>160</sup> It is the "potential Being" [*Ansichseyn*] of humans, their "natural Being" that "is evil."<sup>161</sup> For the will of finite humans is filled by a particularity that "constitutes the content of [their] will";<sup>162</sup> and driven by selfishness, they elevate "above the universal the self-will of private particularity."<sup>163</sup> This is "the source of evil."<sup>164</sup> Yet, at the same time, Hegel

<sup>151</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, vol. 3, p. 1ff.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33ff.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7ff.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100ff.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>163</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon, 1942), p. 92 (§139). Hegel personifies the selfish human will, calling it *the Devil* (cf. *Lectures*, vol. 3, p. 49). Nevertheless, Hegel can speak of the Devil "in tones of unfeigned admiration" (K. Barth, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century. Its Background & History* [London: SCM Press, 1976], p. 402). Cf. Hegel, *Lectures*, vol. 3, p. 50.

<sup>164</sup> Hegel, *Lectures*, vol. 3, p. 52.

could see in the "source of evil" also the "source of health." The need to sublimate the contradiction is established simultaneously with the emergence of evil.<sup>165</sup>

Therefore, in Hegel's work there is a dichotomous description of evil. On the one hand, he defines evil as that which "of necessity ought not to be."<sup>166</sup> Yet, on the other hand, he must maintain the "necessity of evil,"<sup>167</sup> because the development of Spirit *must* run through the separation.

Both characterizations of evil can be thought together only on the basis of the latter, such that evil must exist in order to be abolished. Consequently, it cannot exist without its opposite. It "exists only in opposition to good."<sup>168</sup> To this extent evil is a negative. But as such it is necessary; for "good and evil are inseparable."<sup>169</sup>

In our understanding of Hegel, this view of evil finds expression in his characterization of evil as *nothingness*. According to Hegel, the opposition in which evil exists as a negative is entirely futile [*nichtig*] but not nothing [*nichts*]. As nothingness, evil must enclose the affirmative.<sup>170</sup> As something affirmative, evil "*is a nullity for the infinitude of Spirit.*"<sup>171</sup>

The predicate *nichtig* must always be appropriate for evil. There is no point at which it is not futile, not passing away. It is always a moment in a process, and this means that it is posited eternally and (as God's determination) similarly eternally sublated.<sup>172</sup> *Nichtig* therefore means that evil has neither an absolute being nor an absolute nonbeing. It has no continuing existence "for itself." It only *wants* to exist for itself and is thus "the absolute sham-existence of negativity in itself."<sup>173</sup>

It follows from this that *qua* nothingness evil can acquire no ultimate significance. The "impotence"<sup>174</sup> of the nature of evil conditions the powerlessness of its effects. It is essentially something without consequence.<sup>175</sup> For the "harmony of the contradiction" always governs its contradiction already.<sup>176</sup> Both "primal separations" of the divine Spirit are always to be understood in

<sup>165</sup> Ibid., p. 54ff.

<sup>166</sup> Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, p. 93 (§139).

<sup>167</sup> Ibid.

<sup>168</sup> Hegel, *Lectures*, vol. 3, p. 60.

<sup>169</sup> Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, p. 255.

<sup>170</sup> Cf. Hegel, *Lectures*, p. 66ff.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid., vol. 3, p. 96.

<sup>172</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 71.

<sup>173</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Hegel's Logic: Being Part One of the Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences*, trans. W. Wallace. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975), p. 56 (§35).

<sup>174</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Hegel's Philosophy of Nature*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 23–24 (§250).

<sup>175</sup> Cf. Hegel, *Lectures*, vol. 2, p. 328; vol. 3, pp. 24–25; *Philosophy of Right*, pp. 246, 71, 93.

<sup>176</sup> Hegel, *Lectures*, vol. 3, p. 69.

the identity of both “in spite of this want of correspondence.”<sup>177</sup> This identity is the event of the absolute Spirit. In the process of this event, the Son of God assumes the shame of the world, indeed death, in order to die “the death of death” and to carry out the “negation of the negation.”<sup>178</sup>

Hegel did not clearly trace out the consequences of understanding this reconciliation not only as a reconciliation of God with human beings, but also of God with evil.<sup>179</sup> Certainly his entire train of thought runs in this direction. Reconciliation can never be understood as something achieved, but rather must always be understood solely as an event. Nothingness is constantly being overcome and not overcome, constantly powerful and powerless in an “eternal becoming.”<sup>180</sup> It is constantly necessary and not necessary, so that the becoming of the Spirit can remain an event.

Barth knows to appreciate the “*genuinely* theological” in Hegel.<sup>181</sup> Hegel recognized that the doctrine of evil must also involve God’s *truth* and that this truth exists only as *a concrete event* so that evil can receive no absolute and independent significance. Hegel’s description of evil as nothingness is, therefore, an advance as compared to attempts to grasp evil solely on the basis of the modest horizon of human experience.<sup>182</sup>

Barth’s criticism begins when Hegel identifies God with human reason and arrives at the knowledge of truth on the basis of this reason. The event of God’s vitality thereby becomes an event of human vitality. God’s confrontation with evil is consequently a confrontation with that evil for which the human spirit allows. Thus, Hegel ultimately *legitimizes* evil in its existence. Given the legitimization of evil within Spirit’s becoming, evil must become insignificant or simply something futile—*nichtig*.

This assessment of evil is stringently required within Hegel’s system. But Barth avoided being forced into a system. God’s free decision regarding evil cannot be postulated or “allowed for,” not even in God’s becoming. Hence theology can only speak of evil by *allowing it to be* that which God has excluded. Barth calls evil *nichtig* because God has rejected it. But evil’s insignificance does not follow from God’s rejection, because nothingness brings death to human creatures and to God. That God *was ready for* this death on the cross is the defeat of nothingness. Still, it is subject to *God’s* free sovereign decision and not to that of human beings.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid., p. 70.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid., p. 92.

<sup>179</sup> However, cf. *ibid.*, p. 93, where the death of Christ is characterized as “the marvellous union of these absolute extremes.”

<sup>180</sup> Ibid., p. 124.

<sup>181</sup> K. Barth, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century*, p. 421.

<sup>182</sup> J. Müller criticized Hegel on this level, *The Christian Doctrine of Sin*, vol. 1, pp. 438–39.

For this reason, according to Barth, God's judgment upon nothingness also has ultimate significance. In Hegel's work, nothingness has its eternal playground in the *progressus ad infinitum* of the absolute Spirit. Hence he cannot think of reconciliation as an "incomprehensibly new beginning."<sup>183</sup>

This basic difference between Hegel and Barth makes it impossible to contend that Barth took over the form of his thinking from Hegel. In Hegel's philosophy, form and content cannot be separated at all. The form—Hegel's method—is the content of his philosophy.<sup>184</sup> According to Barth's insight summarized in the points made above, this content corresponds to a knowledge appropriate to revelation. To this extent, Hegel cannot simply be disregarded by theology. But it is not a matter of "taking over" something from Hegel. Indeed, the systematizing of Hegel's genuine theological insights (which have been noted) makes Hegel's entire system disagreeable to Barth. Instead, Barth attempts to set Hegel's insights in a *new* light on the basis of his knowledge of revelation. And in this new light, the concern for the truth and the moment of truth in Hegel's philosophy can in fact acquire a place appropriate to them within theology.

<sup>183</sup> K. Barth, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century*, p. 418.

<sup>184</sup> Cf. G. F. W. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 11–12.

### III

## God's Creation and Nothingness

Creation is the first of the "outward" works of the triune God.<sup>185</sup> As such it is related to God's eternal election of grace as the "inward beginning"<sup>186</sup> of this and all other divine works. Barth expresses the nature of this relation in the well-known formulation that creation is the "external basis of the covenant"<sup>187</sup> and the covenant is the "internal basis of creation."<sup>188</sup> In this relationship the internal ground of creation (grace) is the forward-driving force of the external ground of the covenant (nature). Grace presupposes nature.<sup>189</sup>

Creation is therefore the sphere in which God wishes to realize his electing resolution. Creation itself is not the realization of this resolution, but God creates it by acting in *correspondence* to his concrete Yes and No in Jesus Christ. Yet, already in creation, nothingness is on the scene in its peculiar "being." We can thus expect to find fundamental ontological remarks concerning the "being" of nothingness in Barth's work on this doctrine.

#### BARTH'S EXEGESIS OF GENESIS 1:2

Barth proposed his doctrine of God's creating as an interpretation of the biblical account of creation. He makes his concern clear not by use of ontologically precise formulations, but by use of the mythical representations of the account of creation itself. This makes understanding difficult. Added to this is dispute over the results of Barth's interpretation by historical-critical exegesis,

<sup>185</sup> Cf. *CD* III/1, p. 42ff.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>187</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 94ff.

<sup>188</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 228ff.

<sup>189</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 96; cf. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth*, p. 105; E. Jüngel, "Die Möglichkeit theologischer Anthropologie," p. 544.

for these results are exegetically unusual. They are not won from the text in itself, and therefore always remain exposed to exegetical criticism from those interested solely in the text in itself. Barth's interpretation can only be understood on the basis of the relation which—according to Barth—obtains between God's act of grace and his act as Creator.

It is widely acknowledged today in Old Testament exegesis that Genesis 1:1 is a kind of "superscription"<sup>190</sup> set over the whole account of creation by P, on the basis of which particular works of creation (Gen. 1:3ff.) must be understood.<sup>191</sup> Verse 2 could then speak either of primal reality independent of God or of a so-called "pre-creation." According to Barth, both possibilities are ruled out by both the biblical witness as a whole and the more immediate context. This verse does not speak of a primal and rudimentary condition of the world, but rather of the "primal and rudimentary state . . . of evil."<sup>192</sup> Verse 2 describes the "possibility which God in His creative decision has ignored and despised."<sup>193</sup> The *tohu wabohu* is "that which is waste, and void and empty,"<sup>194</sup> over which what is called the *ruach elohim* hovers, "this God who for His part has become a caricature."<sup>195</sup> This world of chaos was not created by God, and yet it is "real in its absurd way . . . as a sphere of that which has no existence or essence. . . ."<sup>196</sup>

J. F. Konrad's exegetical objection that the *ruach elohim* in P has always meant an "instrument for the realization of salvation history"<sup>197</sup> is not valid in view of the parallelism *membrorum* between Genesis 1:2b and 1:2c. And his assertion that the *ruach elohim* is the "Creator's watch over the uncreated,"<sup>198</sup> that is "plainly portrayed as a tremendous mass of water surrounding creation,"<sup>199</sup> is in keeping with Barth's interpretation that Genesis 1:2 does not describe any work of creation by God. But it evades the task of *thinking through* the relationship between chaos and creation. Barth seeks to do just this however. Clearly, he goes well beyond the possibilities that lie within the

<sup>190</sup> Cf. H. Gunkel, *Genesis*, trans. M. Biddle (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1997), p. 103; W. Zimmerli, *I. Mose 1–11: Die Urgeschichte*, 2nd ed. (Zurich: Zwingli Verlag, 1957), p. 37; G. von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, trans. J. H. Marks (London: SCM Press, 1963), pp. 44–45; J. F. Konrad, *Abbild und Ziel der Schöpfung. Untersuchungen zur Exegese von Genesis 1 und 2 in Barths Kirchlicher Dogmatik III/1. Beiträge zur Geschichte der biblischen Hermeneutik 5* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1962), p. 93.

<sup>191</sup> Cf. also CD III/1, p. 100.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid., p. 108.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid., p. 104.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid., p. 107.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid., p. 108.

<sup>197</sup> *Konrad Abbild*, p. 109; cf. Gen. 1:8, Exod. 31:3, 35:31.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid., p. 110.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid., p. 148.

text. For one can hardly expect from P the type of differentiated treatment of myth that Barth presupposes.<sup>200</sup>

Nevertheless, Barth's interpretation is *in line with* the text. Genesis 1:2 describes reality without God's creating Word. The *ruach elohim* also belongs to this reality.<sup>201</sup> But in this reality Barth recognizes *the old*, "which according to 2 Cor 5:17 had radically passed away in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ."<sup>202</sup> Contrary to a "diffuse . . . biblicism,"<sup>203</sup> creation is here understood as an event corresponding to reconciliation. God acts in creation in such a way that he concretely orients creation toward reconciliation. Thus, God's action has *ontological* consequences. And for this reason, in interpreting the history of creation we cannot be satisfied with describing "just the facts." We must show from whence they come and whither they are going. The whence of the reality of creation is God's affirming Word.

But the chaos does not draw its existence from the affirming Word of God. Therefore, God's action at creation has no positive ontological consequences for chaos itself. It receives neither the ascription of "being" nor is it the non-being that necessarily corresponds to creation. It consists only in an ontological deficiency, an ontological emptiness.<sup>204</sup>

So if Barth has to speak of nothingness in ontological negations, he must thereby reckon with the impossibility of speaking of nothingness ontologically. With this we confront what Barth calls the "*ontic* of nothingness."

### EXCURSUS: BEING AND NONBEING PLATO'S *SOPHIST*

Barth's use of the concept "nonbeing" to designate nothingness requires that a boundary be drawn with regard to Platonic discourse about the "being of what does not exist."<sup>205</sup>

<sup>200</sup> Cf. von Rad, *Genesis*, pp. 45–46.

<sup>201</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 47–48; K. Galling, "Der Charakter der Chaosschilderung," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 47 (1950), p. 150ff.

<sup>202</sup> *CD III/1*, p. 110.

<sup>203</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 24. [Trans.: The English text omits the German "diffusen."]

<sup>204</sup> So under no circumstances can it be said that Barth traces the relation of reality and nothingness back to an "ontological difference," as does Konrad, *Abbild*, p. 147.

<sup>205</sup> On the charge that Barth inscribed in theology the Platonic "distinction between being and non-being as a contrast between God's sovereignty and the sovereignty of chaos," see H. van Oyen, cited by G. C. Berkhouwer, *The Triumph of Grace*, p. 247. Cf. also M. Mezger, "Gottes Gnadenwahl," *Verkündigung und Forschung. Theologischer Jahresbericht*, 1947/8 (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1949), p. 95. Of course, behind van Oyen's accusation stands to a greater or lesser extent a notion of the relation of being and nonbeing which is characteristic of both Plato and Platonism. For Platonism, what exists is the suprasensory, the idea. Over against this, the sensory is the *μη ον*. As such, it is certainly not the absolutely nonexistent (*οὐχ ον*). It is not nothing, even though it may not be characterized as existing either. If we characterize it as existing, then the sensory must be measured against the suprasensory from which it has but the shadow and residue of existence (cf. Plotinus, "On What Are and Whence Come Evils," in *Plotinus*, vol. 1, English trans. by A. H. Armstrong [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966], pp. 279–80. See below, p. 54ff).

In his late dialogue the *Sophist*, Plato debates the extent to which a Sophist can pass off something as existing which does not exist at all in reality.<sup>206</sup> It is realized that what does not exist is in itself unspeakable.<sup>207</sup> Yet it cannot follow from this that there can be no false propositions at all. Rather, what exists and what does not exist have always existed together in a unique interweaving.<sup>208</sup> One can say of what does not exist that it somehow exists, just as one can say of that which exists that it somehow does not exist.<sup>209</sup> So, with the aid of "dialectical science,"<sup>210</sup> Plato searches out what in this relationship specifically obtains here. The following basic concepts are advanced in order to arrive at judgments concerning being: *being itself*, *rest* and *motion*,<sup>211</sup> *identity*<sup>212</sup> and *otherness*.<sup>213</sup> With the help of these basic concepts, Plato is able to determine the relationship between what exists and what does not exist. He exemplifies the matter using the instance of *motion*. *Motion* is different from rest. It is *not* rest. Nevertheless it *is*, for indeed it has a part in what exists. Likewise, it is different from *identity*. It is not *identity*. Nevertheless it has a part in *identity*, as everything has a part in it. And so *motion* is also different from what exists. Yet, insofar as it has a part in what exists, it is also *existing* essentially as something which does not exist. In understanding what exists and what does not exist, it follows from this that what does not exist is not something *contrary* to what exists, but rather its *other*.<sup>214</sup> What does not exist does *not* exist insofar as it is not another existent. It is non-*existing* insofar as it has a part in the existing.<sup>215</sup> For this reason Plato can say in sum that what exists "is" in many ways and "is not" in many ways.<sup>216</sup> Even a false proposition is a proposition about something. But a false proposition can subsequently be seen *to be* false by the fact that in it what "does not belong together has been gathered up in an act of weaving together."<sup>217</sup>

In Plato, as distinct from Barth, the part of what does not exist in what does exist is a *positive* one. Being inheres in that which does not exist because

<sup>206</sup> Plato, *The Sophist & The Statesman*, eds. R. Klibansky and E. Anscombe, trans. A. E. Taylor (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1971). All subsequent references will be made to the standard Bekker numbering. Here, cf. 241a.

<sup>207</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 238c 7ff.

<sup>208</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 240c 1-2.

<sup>209</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 241d 6-7.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*, 253d 2-3.

<sup>211</sup> *CD* III/3, p. 349.

<sup>212</sup> Plato, *The Sophist & The Statesman*, 255c 4.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*, 255c 5-6.

<sup>214</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 257b 3-4.

<sup>215</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 257b 9ff.; 258d 6ff.

<sup>216</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 259b 1ff.

<sup>217</sup> Cf. J. Stenzel, "Metaphysik des Altertums," in *Handbuch der Philosophie*, vol. 4 (Munich: R. Oldenbourg, 1931), pp. 144-45.

it belongs as such within the order of being. By contrast, in Barth's work the order of being affords no place for nothingness. Its "being" is not constituted through participation in the being of creation. Even if it *appears* within the being of creation by clothing itself in particular forms, it is, nevertheless, not ontologically grounded in the being of creation. For this reason, the relationship between nothingness and creation cannot be reversed as is the relation between what does and does not exist in Plato; we cannot say, "If nothingness exists then creation is also nothing." Because nothingness has an existence *sui generis*, it cannot ever be identified with the nonbeing that belongs to creation as though it were something in creation. Admittedly, it has its "existence" only insofar as it is directed *against* creation. But this is something entirely different than ontological participation in the existence of creation in the form of non-*being*.

### THE ONTIC OF NOTHINGNESS

Barth introduces his ontic of nothingness with two delimiting remarks. First, he states that while nothingness is evidently "neither God nor God's creature," all the same it is "not nothing or non-existent." It is "in a third way."<sup>218</sup> Second, he avers that nothingness is not simply identical to what *is not*, to what is "not God and not the creature." This "not" belongs both to the perfection of the relationship between God and creature as well as to the perfection of the creature itself. It is a "legitimate not."<sup>219</sup>

Both these remarks intend to say that nothingness is neither *nihil pure negativum* nor relative nonbeing in contrast to being.

Yet there are statements in Barth's work which equate nothingness to a *nothing*: "What God has eternally denied, what is not willed by Him, constitutes that which is not, that which is empty, which is necessarily nothing[!]"<sup>220</sup> On the other hand, he can also say that nothingness has only the "autonomy and status of the *non-being*."<sup>221</sup> Then, in turn, Barth can distinguish between nonbeing and nothing in the sense that nonbeing belongs to the good creation, while nothing is purely that which threatens the good creation.<sup>222</sup>

Finally, Barth explicitly wants to teach *creatio ex nihilo*. In order to do so, the idea that God formed creation out of the chaos as nothingness must be ruled out. And yet, the fact that creation is threatened by nothingness is

<sup>218</sup> CD III/3, p. 349.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid., pp. 349–50.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid., p. 76.

<sup>221</sup> CD II/2, p. 170.

<sup>222</sup> Cf. CD III/2, p. 595.

attributed to God's having created creation from nothing—that is, having separated it from what God did not will.<sup>223</sup> It is evident that Barth uses the concepts “nothing” and “nonbeing” equivocally. And so it is necessary to distinguish these concepts and then to characterize what is peculiar to each.

Barth suspects that the church's doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* is an exercise that wants to oppose “speculation to speculation.”<sup>224</sup> It aimed, justifiably, to check monism and dualism and to preserve the exclusive initiative of the Creator. But it set the concept of *creatio ex nihilo* in the context of discussion of the possible origins of the world and thereby made it into a speculative *theologumenon*.

For Barth, the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* can only acquire theological legitimacy in connection with God's concrete act of grace. In accordance with this action, creation only exists so that God can act toward his elected partner. Therefore, creaturely being means being “summoned [into life] because chosen.”<sup>225</sup> The creature owes itself to God's call, to God's *Word*. It has *nothing* else before it other than this word.<sup>226</sup>

According to Barth, this understanding of the human being as a “being summoned” proves that “in the formula *creatus ex nihilo* we have a fine and clear if negative witness.”<sup>227</sup> Because the human creature is “summoned into life by God, he is not God but distinct from God and therefore no part or emanation from the divine being. And as he is summoned into life by God, he exists through God and not apart from Him or independently of Him.”<sup>228</sup>

Yet this “*ex nihilo*” in no way says that human beings trace their ancestry back to the void. If this were so then they would simply *not* be “*ex nihilo*” in the sense of a meaningless *ex nihilo pure negativo*.<sup>229</sup> As “God and His Word” stands behind them, human beings are “very much *ex aliquo*.”<sup>230</sup> The nothing of which the concept of *creatio ex nihilo* speaks is, as it were, a “nothing present to God.”<sup>231</sup> Where the human is *not*, *God* is.

<sup>223</sup> Cf. CD III/3, p. 73.

<sup>224</sup> CD III/2, p. 155.

<sup>225</sup> “*Aufgerufensein auf Grund von Erwählensein*”—*ibid.*, p. 150.

<sup>226</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 152.

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 155.

<sup>228</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>229</sup> Indeed, when we think of an abstract *nihil negativum* the danger immediately arises that we think of it as “the conceptual opposite of what truly and authentically (*eigentlich*) ‘is’; it becomes the *summum ens*, God as *ens increatum*”—M. Heidegger, “What is Metaphysics?” in *Existence and Being*, ed. W. Brock, trans. R. F. C. Hull and A. Crick (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1949), p. 345. A nothing that stands over against God is no longer in fact *nihil pure negativum*, but rather a *nihil privativum*.

<sup>230</sup> CD III/2, p. 155.

<sup>231</sup> D. Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, trans. M. Rüter and I. Tödt, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 3* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), p. 34: “Thus God needed no link between God and the creation; even the nothing constitutes no such ‘between.’” Bonhoeffer takes *creatio ex nihilo* to mean creation solely on the basis of the freedom of God (cf. p. 35).

Hence the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* stands opposed to the metaphysical proposition "*ex nihilo nihil fit*" and not to the similarly metaphysical statement "*ex nihilo fit*." Rather, it is a statement of *faith* to assert that God created human beings from nothing.<sup>232</sup> Faith confesses that nothing else precedes human beings other than God's Word in Jesus Christ. According to Barth, this confession makes it "right and sensible to apply this principle not merely to man, but . . . to creation as a whole, the objective order of things being understood in accordance with the existence of the believer."<sup>233</sup>

The doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* is, therefore, the *negative elucidation* of the positive statement that the creation owes itself solely to God's summons. "Nothing" does not stand between God and creation. And yet Barth asserts at another point that God created the creature "'out of nothing'—that is, by distinguishing that which He willed from that which He did not will, and by giving it existence on the basis of that distinction."<sup>234</sup> For Barth, the threat that nothingness poses to the creature arises all at once from this fact.<sup>235</sup> Yet the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* speaks of creation's *preservation*. Thus the nothing from which God *separates* the creature at creation denotes a reality other than that of which the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* speaks.

It is in Genesis 1:3ff. that Barth finds the exegetical bases for describing God's action as Creator as one of separating. God separates the light from the darkness, day from night, the waters of the heavens from the waters on earth, the land from the sea. And according to Barth it is *as a consequence* of this separation that "there arises even within [!] the good creation of God a side which is as it were the neighbour and frontier of chaos."<sup>236</sup>

Barth's exegesis is particularly controversial.<sup>237</sup> First and foremost, it remains

<sup>232</sup> At CD IV/1, p. 574, Barth also wants to understand *iustificatio impii* as *creatio ex nihilo* or *ex contrario*. This aims to express the fact that justification of the sinner presupposes only God's summoning Word alone, and not the sinner's being (cf. Rom. 4:17). At the same time, however, the event of justification is distinguished from creation; only the character of God's acts in one and the other instance which is comparable.

<sup>233</sup> CD III/2, p. 157. We may ask whether Barth ought not to have entered into the conversation with Martin Heidegger in the context negotiated above, instead of in the doctrine of nothingness (cf. CD III/3, p. 334ff.). When Barth, in that place, measures Heidegger's philosophy against his understanding of nothingness, he interrogates it about something concerning which it wishes to and does in fact say nothing. Hence Barth does not engage in a real conversation with Heidegger's proposition: *ex nihilo omne ens qua ens fit*. It is in the nothingness of *Dasein* that the existent altogether satisfies its own-most possibility for the first time, that is, to be itself in a finite manner (CD III/3, pp. 346–47). Heidegger compared this proposition to the church's traditional doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. What concerns Heidegger might first be understood on the basis of this comparison, and then subjected to theological criticism.

<sup>234</sup> CD III/3, p. 73.

<sup>235</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 73–74.

<sup>236</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 352.

<sup>237</sup> On this, cf. Konrad, *Abbild*, p. 117ff.

unclear whether God does not in fact create the world out of chaos when separating the individual elements of creation step by step. As separated elements they are of course no longer chaos. But they are still "the memory of chaos *in* the cosmos."<sup>238</sup> Indeed, they even seem to afford possibilities for the chaos to break in, for example by the upper and lower waters being able to flow together again.

Barth's intention, however, is to interpret the Yes and No that God speaks at creation in correspondence to the eternal Yes and No spoken in the beginning by God. God says Yes to light and No to darkness. Thus God enacts the *basic separation* between light as good creation and darkness as chaos. In the course of the work of creation there come about further separations which correspond to this basic act. In this, Barth strictly excludes all discussion of any pre-existence of the chaos. It comes into view only *as* something separated and rejected.<sup>239</sup> But it comes into the picture through the elements of creation that are contained within creation and separated from the chaos, elements that are introduced at the "periphery" of creation that borders the chaos.<sup>240</sup> Because these elements only exist with the positive elements, they belong to the good creation as such. Hence they also owe themselves to God's Word as Creator, although the concept of God creating as "separating" conceals precisely this fact.

Barth was not consistent in thinking this concept through to its conclusion. That is to say, if the idea of separating the chaos into separated elements were actually thought through consistently, one would have to conceive of nothingness (as did Schleiermacher) as that which is "broken in pieces" in the perfect unity of the world.<sup>241</sup> This is how nothingness would have to be taken up ontologically into the continued existence of the world.

And such a possibility has not been ruled out so long as the relation between the being of nothingness and that of creation has yet to be described with ontological precision. That is, Barth's exegesis is not completely and totally played out on a "high ontological plane."<sup>242</sup> It clearly remains diffident toward the conceptions of the text itself and for this reason can defend against the questions we are pressing by arguing that the text does not answer them. But because Barth wants to lay out his doctrine of creation and not an abstract exegesis, we must continue to press critical questions: is the "being" of nothingness not ultimately a kind of highly inferior level of being in

<sup>238</sup> CD III/1, p. 133.

<sup>239</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 136.

<sup>240</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 143.

<sup>241</sup> Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, §68,2, pp. 277–78.

<sup>242</sup> So argues Konrad, *Abbild*, p. 124.

Barth's view? According to his exegesis of Genesis 1:3ff., does it not seem as though the being of creation declines toward nothingness—first, the being positively willed by God, then the shadow side at the periphery of creation, and then nothingness? This would contradict Barth's basic position that nothingness receives no justification for its being from creation, *ex radice*. Thus, a certain corrective to Barth's view of the "shadow side" of creation must occur.

The way toward this corrective is pointed out by the reason Barth gives for the existence of a light side and dark side of creation as he augments his exegesis, as it were, "from within"—that is, on the basis of the covenant. The truth of the being and the work of Jesus Christ alone constitutes the reality of good creation. It constitutes it in its light side and dark side on the basis of the *different* events of the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. "Since everything is created for Jesus Christ and His death and resurrection, from the very outset everything [!] must stand under this twofold and contradictory determination. It is nothing but something; yet it is something on the edge of nothing, bordering it and menaced by it, and having no power of itself to overcome the danger."<sup>243</sup>

The questionable thing in this line of reasoning is the assertion of the necessity (the "must"!) of the shadow side of creation. Barth arrives at this assertion because he argues in anticipation of the *difference* between cross and resurrection. As "the cross is followed by resurrection, humiliation by exaltation,"<sup>244</sup> so too must the positive aspect of existence follow upon the negative, but also—and at this point the thought becomes questionable—the negative must precede the positive. Cross and resurrection are viewed here too strictly as events isolated from one another. For this reason the negative aspect of existence is able to become an isolated problem.

This abstraction can only be avoided when, in correspondence with the one *history* of cross and resurrection, creation is also regarded *historically* in both aspects of its existence. When this is done, creation can only be conceived of in the *relation* of both of its aspects. This relation is not only constructed from the light side. Indeed, God has already conquered death *in* death. If the shadow side depicts *this* death, then relation to God's victory that overcomes nothingness is already present in it. Consequently it cannot be a "realm" on the "periphery" of creation, which is particularly susceptible to the incursion of nothingness. Rather, it is a witness to God's victory.

<sup>243</sup> CD III/1, p. 376.

<sup>244</sup> Ibid., p. 384.

As Barth also stresses, the light side and the shadow side are not simply stabilized by reconciliation.<sup>245</sup> The opposition of the light and shadow sides can only be understood in their opposition *being dissolved*.<sup>246</sup>

Because the creation is grounded in the *event* of reconciliation there cannot be a hierarchy within its existence that declines toward nothingness.<sup>247</sup> The notion of the “periphery” of creation and Barth’s other similarly understandable formulations should be corrected or dispensed with. They depict the relation between creation and nothingness on a rigidly inclined plane and thereby contradict the nature of the correspondence between creation and covenant.

But Barth’s intention—to conceive of the creature as a creature threatened by nothingness—can certainly be set forth on the basis of reconciliation without making use of such spatial concepts. That the creature is threatened is rooted in the fact that where God’s Yes is an event, nothingness is also present, at work against this event. Where the creation abstracts itself from this event, nothingness gains space. And the light side of the creation is threatened by this, just as is the shadow side! For the light and shadow sides of creation can persevere only on the basis of the faithfulness of the Creator.

Thus Barth can also say that along with the twofold character of creation willed by God belong the “lines . . . continuities . . . and constants” of the creaturely world that, in their worldly truth, “in all [their] relativity [are] at least an obstacle to the onrush of chaos into the terrestrial life.”<sup>248</sup>

This explains Barth’s misleading assertion that the endangerment of the creature is rooted in its being created from nothing. In distinction to the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, “nothing” here means that reality hostile to God and excluded from creation. What is created is threatened by the act of creation only insofar as, in the course of it, God also speaks the No that brings nothingness into its annihilating form as something that endangers both God and

<sup>245</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 383ff.

<sup>246</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 384.

<sup>247</sup> Cf. H. Kuhn, *Begegnungen mit dem Sein. Meditationen zur Metaphysik des Gewissens* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1954), pp. 1–2. If the being of an existent is encountered “against the backdrop . . . of nothingness and as the unutterable withdrawal from it,” then “naked being as existence stands over against non-being in the sense of an either-or. For the stark experience of existence there is neither a link, an existent-non-existent, nor a ladder from more-existent to less-existent.” Barth would also have to agree theologically with this statement, for nothingness is not a middle term between being and nonbeing.

<sup>248</sup> *CD IV/3*, pp. 141–42. On Barth’s doctrine of creation’s “self-attestation” cf. *ibid.*, p. 135ff. For discussion of the charge that Barth reverts to natural theology at this point, see E. Jüngel, *God’s Being Is in Becoming*, pp. 20–21, note 25; *contra* G. Koch, “Gotteserkenntnis ohne Christus?” *Evangelische Theologie* 23 (1963), p. 573ff.; and A. Szekeres, “Karl Barth und die natürliche Theologie,” *Evangelische Theologie* 24 (1964), p. 229ff.

the creation. Because it can give rise to an erroneous interpretation of the doctrine of the *creatio ex nihilo*, terminologically the concept *Nichts* is confusing as a designation for this reality. We may now show just why it is, nevertheless, that Barth returns to this concept time and again.

The heart of Barth's doctrine of creation is anthropology. In creation God aims at the human being. This human is Jesus Christ. He is the "place of light" from which one can "look in the first instance at the nature of man,"<sup>249</sup> since the being of the human is ontologically constituted by him. And such human being is being in correspondence to God himself. For "man generally, the man with the fellow-man, has indeed a part in the divine likeness of the man Jesus, the man *for* the fellow-man. As man generally is modelled on the man Jesus and His being for others, and as the man Jesus is modelled on God, it has to be said of man generally that he is created in the image of God."<sup>250</sup> Human persons in correspondence to themselves and other humans are persons determined by God to be covenant partners and addressed as such. Human being is grounded in this determination. "God speaks—the human person corresponds. In this way the human person is *imago dei*."<sup>251</sup>

Why this correspondence between God and humans—which is to be understood as an *analogia relationis*—does not imply an *analogia entis* has already been shown.<sup>252</sup> In the context of exploring our theme, it was necessary to recall Barth's theological grounding of anthropology because in the course of it Barth comes to assert the natural finitude of the human.<sup>253</sup> Limited human existence in time corresponds to God's once for all "Yes" to the human creature. But this means that before all human being, "*non-being*"<sup>254</sup> must exist "somewhere," namely the nonbeing which once again confronts human beings in death.

First, as to the *beginning* of human being: human being is complete by virtue of God creating it within a limited time. The archetype of this completion is the man Jesus. But Jesus is simultaneously also the Lord of time, for in his time he turned humanity to face God's eternity. For this reason the single being of the man Jesus is "the boundary" of the being of all people: "His birth is the presupposition of their birth, and His death of their death."<sup>255</sup>

<sup>249</sup> CD III/2, p. 46. Barth's emphasis deleted.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid., p. 324. Emphasis added.

<sup>251</sup> Jüngel, "Die Möglichkeit theologischer Anthropologie," p. 552 (original emphasis).

<sup>252</sup> Cf. above p. 35.

<sup>253</sup> Cf. CD III/2, p. 437.

<sup>254</sup> Ibid., p. 574.

<sup>255</sup> CD III/4, p. 578.

"He is the One by whom we are surrounded on all sides."<sup>256</sup> Our being is, as it were, "embedded in His eternity."<sup>257</sup>

Yet the fact that human beings have their origin in nonbeing does not subsequently entail "any deficiency or shadow in their being."<sup>258</sup> They are not threatened by this; rather they are "held and supported."<sup>259</sup>

On this presupposition, human nonbeing is the *ontological origin* of humans. In theological terms this means that God's being, which "*as outside is for us*," is an event.<sup>260</sup> Hence this nonbeing is identical with that of which the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* spoke.

In relation to our leading problem, it is very instructive that Barth uses the concept "nonbeing" (*Nicht-Sein*) in this sense only within the context of his discussion of time.<sup>261</sup> On the other hand, he continuously designates as "nothing" (*Nichts*) that nonbeing which lacks this presence of God.<sup>262</sup> Humans do not derive from nothing in this latter sense. We certainly come forth "from our *non-being*, but we do not come from nothing."<sup>263</sup>

If Barth can go on to say that the origin of humans in nonbeing means "even from my origin I have been threatened by annihilation,"<sup>264</sup> such a remark is once again expressed in a very easily misunderstood fashion. For, given the identity of God, "the simple alternative[—]either the gracious God (and He alone) is for us, or nothingness is the abyss from which we have emerged and to which we shall return"<sup>265</sup>—does not exist ontologically. Rather, it is ontologically impossible for the human to have emerged from nothing. In saying this, we do not dispute the assertion that that nothing has been set against human beings from their very beginning. But this has naught to do with their beginning as such.

According to what has been said, the following emerges for the ontological understanding of the concepts of nonbeing and nothing: the human nonbeing is *not a neutral structure* that could be occupied or filled—either by God or by nothing *qua* nothingness.<sup>266</sup> If God in Jesus Christ is the presupposition

<sup>256</sup> CD III/2, p. 571. Barth's emphasis deleted.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid., p. 568.

<sup>258</sup> Ibid., p. 577.

<sup>259</sup> Ibid.

<sup>260</sup> Ibid., p. 569.

<sup>261</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 567, 568, 576, 577, 595, 611.

<sup>262</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 569, 570, 596, 597, 607–8, 610, 619, 625, 628.

<sup>263</sup> Ibid., p. 576.

<sup>264</sup> Ibid., p. 574. It appears that, amid periodic blurring of the distinction between "nonbeing" and "nothing," Barth adopts an idea already to be found in the work of J. Andreas Quenstedt—creatures that are created by God are not *nonentia*, but *posita extra nihil* and thus proximate to nothing (cf. Quenstedt, *Theologia Didactico-polemica* [Wittenberg: J. L. Quenstedt, 1685], I.viii (p. 81, col. 425).

<sup>265</sup> CD III/2, p. 569.

<sup>266</sup> Here Barth distinguishes his view of nonbeing from, for instance, a version which takes "nothing" and "all" to be an reversible alternative. Precisely this is ruled-out for Barth because nothing (nonbeing) is decisively qualified by God.

of human being, then nothingness cannot stand in God's place. Yet it is directed against God and thereby also against human nonbeing just as much as against their being. Again, it follows from this that we cannot come to understand "nothing" as the formal antithesis to human creaturely being. The *non-being* which Barth undoubtedly predicates of the *being* of creation is a non-being of an entirely different sort. In order to accentuate this, Barth simply calls it *Nichts*—nothing—or better, *Nichtiges*—nothingness.<sup>267</sup>

This distinction between "nonbeing" and "nothing" is confirmed by Barth's understanding of *death*, which is certainly also a form of nothingness. For *sinner*s, the conclusion of their lives can only mean confrontation with *nothing*.<sup>268</sup> But the man Jesus took it upon himself to die this accursed death for sinners.<sup>269</sup> According to Barth, he could die this accursed death because his being was finite being. Of course, death as both the "end of our temporal existence" and death "as negation of human being" are a fact in Jesus' death on the cross, but they are *not* identical "out of biological *necessity*."<sup>270</sup> Because Jesus' actual death benefits all people elected in him, the good determination of human creatures as those who are able to die is also to their benefit.

Therefore, for those whom God elects, as the gate into human nonbeing death means God's presence. God determines that as creatures who one day

<sup>267</sup> Barth does emphasize, on the other hand, that *das Nichtige* is "*nicht Nichts*" (CD III/3, p. 349) in order to delimit the understanding of nothingness as *nihil pure negativum*.

<sup>268</sup> Cf. CD III/2, p. 596.

<sup>269</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 608ff.

<sup>270</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 628–29. According to H. Vogel, Barth's conclusion regarding the capacity of Jesus' human existence to die is a "false conclusion" (cf. "Ecce Homo," p. 124), because it is based upon separating "Jesus in himself and Jesus for us" (pp. 123–24). In fact, Barth did speak of the finitude of Jesus' human existence "*an sich und als solcher*" (CD III/2, p. 629 [Trans. translates this "intrinsically"]). But Barth wants to say that because God wills to be for us in the death of Jesus, the finite being of Jesus is also and especially a being for us. This becomes clear in the *movement* of Jesus' being that Barth later describes in christology. The material ground for the suffering and accursed death of Jesus is the *exaltation* which befalls him on the basis of his abasement. Exaltation means affirmation. Affirmation means gracious delimitation by God. As the human person delimited by the gracious, self-humbling God, the man Jesus is the man for us. In him all other people stand under the determination of being graciously delimited. When thought on the basis of the history of Jesus Christ, it is no abstraction from *Christus pro nobis* to assert the capacity of Jesus' human existence to die—for, if it were so, then every ontological statement about human being that was attained christologically would, in principle, be taken to be an abstraction from the history of Jesus Christ's being. According to Vogel, the being of the truly human one is "*hidden in the mystery of the substitution*" (*Gott in Christo*, p. 442). Hence, human being is only to be believed—and not deduced—from Jesus Christ. Faith believes what cannot be proven in the world. Therefore, the statements faith makes about the true human being can only be paradoxical statements, sealed in the mystery of the being of Jesus Christ. Accordingly, anthropology must be placed under an eschatological reservation. Only in the eschaton will humans see the truth of their being. Consequently, Vogel's question to Barth is whether Barth doesn't in fact cease thinking from the mystery of the being of Jesus Christ when he grants ontological relevance to the *analogia fidei*. For Barth, however, the mystery of the being of Jesus Christ is the mystery of the *revealed* being of Jesus Christ. In it, the *event* of the human existence of Jesus Christ remains grounded *extra se* in the *event* of God's *Yes*. This *extra se*, and so also the mystery of true human being, preserves Barth's understanding of the *analogia fidei* as an *analogia proportionalitas*.

“will have been,” humans will not pass into nothing but rather “will share the eternal life of God Himself.”<sup>271</sup> Nothing—that is, nothingness—has no ontological place in death. We only expect that it does so to the degree that we, as sinners, deliver our being over to nothingness. Death can only become ruin for us when in death nothingness turns against God’s good determination of human nonbeing. But this is a possibility for human being that God rules out ontologically.

### NOTHINGNESS AS AN ONTOLOGICAL IMPOSSIBILITY

Nothingness withdraws itself from every ontological dialectic. It can arguably pretend to be the origin of creation. But it is not this origin. It can arguably attack the shadow—together with the light—side of creation. But it is not the shadow side of creation. It can arguably lay claim to creaturely nonbeing for itself. But it is not this nonbeing.

Its character consists in this threefold nonbeing. Barth expresses this by speaking of the “peculiar third way” of the being of nothingness. This third way consists in the fact that nothingness is neither God nor *nihil pure negativum*; it is neither creaturely being nor creaturely nonbeing. It is only in opposition to all this.

Herein lies the main reason for the conceptual unclarity in Barth. Because he must describe nothingness not only as an antithesis to being, but also to the nonbeing of creation, apparently dialectical remarks about nothingness arise which in themselves are not strictly “dialectical.” Rather, they express an ontological absurdity. Where creaturely being is, nothingness is the negation of this being. Where creaturely nonbeing is, nothingness is the negation of this nonbeing.

From this it follows that something like “being” can certainly be predicated of nothingness, but only insofar as it is the antithesis of the *nonbeing* of the creature and not *nihil pure negativum*. And yet it also follows that something like “non-being” can be predicated of nothingness, but only insofar as it is the antithesis of the *being* of the creature and the *being* of God.

The being and nonbeing that can be predicated of nothingness can never be identified with the being and nonbeing of creation. Yet, according to Barth, nothingness is not, for this reason, a mere appearance.<sup>272</sup> It is *there*, it *exists*, but only “in its own improper way . . . as impossible possibility.”<sup>273</sup>

<sup>271</sup> CD III/2, p. 633.

<sup>272</sup> Cf. CD III/3, p. 353, in contrast to p. 158: The being of nothingness is the one “*potent appearance*.” Barth here simply wants to communicate that nothingness appears to be something which, by virtue of the victory of God, it really is not.

<sup>273</sup> Ibid., p. 351.

This insight may certainly not be rendered harmless rashly by talk—so frequent in the nineteenth century—about how “evil was always *in the good*.”<sup>274</sup> Such talk creates the impression that so-called evil and so-called good are two *states of affairs* that stand in a certain clear relation to one another. This relation might be constituted by evil's *participation* in the good. But just such a participation is excluded ontologically in Barth's account. Evil is “not *for* the good, but *against* the good.”<sup>275</sup> And it is against the good not only because the good exists. It is against the good because under God's No it is nothingness. It is not a dialectic between good and evil that makes nothingness into nothingness. And so it cannot be comprehended in its existence as nothingness even with the help of the abstract consideration that where evil is, the good must also be. Nothingness can be understood in its existence only “in the negativity proper to it in its relationship to God and decisively in God's relationship of repudiation to it.”<sup>276</sup>

This negativity of the being of nothingness cannot be *expressed* in any other way than in an analogy to what is called “negation” and “position” in the sphere of creation. But it may not be *understood* by analogy to what is called “negation” and “position” in the sphere of creation.<sup>277</sup> No position underlies the negation in which nothingness is. For in its being it is not only the reversal of all creaturely value. It is its exclusion. In nothingness, this exclusion has no meaning itself.<sup>278</sup> Hence in its revolt against creation, it does not pursue a sensible purpose; it aims only to destroy. When Barth describes the being of nothingness not with ontological but rather with *ontologically impossible* assignments, this accords with the meaninglessness of its being.

In the course this inquiry, the concept of “ontological impossibility” proves to be greatly in need of interpretation. It does not completely charac-

<sup>274</sup> Cf. Müller, *The Christian Doctrine of Sin*, vol. 1, pp. 305–6: “As however this sentence is used by many, e.g. in former time by *Augustine* and *Pseudo-Dionysius Ariopagita* . . . it is said to denote, that no objective, substantial being belongs to evil . . . but that it . . . is ever necessitated to attach itself to a, in itself, (in the metaphysical sense) good, which it misuses and perverts, in order, on it as basis, to bring . . . its unbeing, to essential existence.”

<sup>275</sup> CD IV/1, p. 399.

<sup>276</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 178.

<sup>277</sup> The whole fruitless debate as to whether the nature of nothingness consists in a position or in a negation suffers from the fact that all statements about evil are understood within such an analogy. J. Müller has justifiably contended against Leibnitz's assertion that evil, as negation, is a mere deficiency which belongs to the metaphysical perfection of creation. In connection with Augustine, Müller wanted to understand the *private boni* of evil as a “depriving activity that diminishes being” (*The Christian Doctrine of Sin*, vol. 1, p. 316). But from this he concluded that the “negating tendency in evil has for its ground a perverted position” (p. 318). In this way evil was thought of as an ordered, focused power that rose against the creation from out of a determinate position. In fact, although Müller did not intend so, it became a kind of “counter God.”

<sup>278</sup> CD IV/3, p. 178.

terize the being of nothingness—above all in its specific act—and so must be constantly supplied with supplementary assignations. Hence, any interpretation of Barth's doctrine of nothingness is tasked with characterizing the peculiar being of nothingness with a more precise and more comprehensive concept. This concept will have to express that nothingness "is" only as something denied by God, that it is determined by God solely to pass away, and that it only exists in actuality in that it rises up against God and God's creation.

In the formation of the concept, we can proceed from the fact that creation was made by God with definite ontological structures that correspond to God's being. We denote all these ontologically basic structures that permeate all creaturely being as the *hypostasis* of creation.<sup>279</sup> Creaturely being is distinguished by the fact that coming forth from God it exists in a hypostasis. This hypostasis makes *existence* in this being possible for each particular creaturely being.

God did not afford an ontological structure to nothingness and, consequently, granted it no hypostasis either. Therefore it is *anhypostatic*. But there cannot be *anhypostatic being-in-itself*. This would be a *nihil pure negativum*. Hence the idea of *anhypostatic* being is first conceivable only on the basis of the presupposition of the participation of this being in another *hypostasis*.<sup>280</sup> Pseudo-Dionysios Areopagite understood the subsistence of evil as the subsistence of a parasite in this sense.<sup>281</sup> Evil has no being of its own. It only "is" by realizing itself in creation. This realization of evil here is of course interjected into the course of the realization of the good.<sup>282</sup> It belongs to being as a deficiency of the good that is necessary for the sake of the good.<sup>283</sup> Hence the *anhypostasis* of evil can be thought of only on the basis of its *enhyposstasis* in the good.

<sup>279</sup> The concept of the *hypostasis* says more here than the conventional concept of "person." It specifically characterizes the being of creation as a being that was willed by God.

<sup>280</sup> For example, the christological doctrine of the *anhypostasis* and *enhyposstasis* of the human nature of Jesus Christ is structured in this way. The human nature of Jesus Christ receives no being independent of the second mode of being of the divine nature. The man Jesus is of course determined by God to be and to exist anhypostatically (cf. E. Jüngel's interpretation of the doctrine of the en- and anhypostasis of the human nature of Jesus Christ—"Jesu Wort und Jesus als Wort Gottes. Ein hermeneutischer Beitrag zum christologischen Problem," in *Parrhesia, Karl Barth zum 80. Geburtstag* [Zurich: EVZ Verlag, 1966], p. 90ff.). But it can only exist anhypostatically on the basis of the enhyposstasis in the (second) divine hypostasis. This formal reference to another possible use of the concept of anhypostasis in theology calls attention to a different character of our thought here, but in no way seeks to provide it with a justification.

<sup>281</sup> Cf. "The Divine Names," in C. Luibheid, trans., *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), IV/31, p. 94.

<sup>282</sup> Cf. *ibid.*

<sup>283</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, IV/20, pp. 86–87.

But given Barth's presuppositions, it is essential that nothingness is not in any *hypostasis*. It is only directed *against* the hypostatic being of creation. It only exists because it invades this being. It strives ontically after a foreign *hypostasis*, but it does not intend to remain in it. Rather, in its incursion it pulls hypostatic being along with it into its own ruin. Thus, it strives after something that ontologically it is not and does not want to remain ontically. This is the absurdity and complete meaninglessness of its being and character. In the forms of sin, death, and evil, it wants to win room in creation; yet it pulls into ruin the very room that it gains.

This characteristic tendency of the being of nothingness can be expressed by designating its being without hypostasis from God as *antithetically anhypostatic being*. This concept describes both the ontological impossibility and the effect of the being of nothingness. But at the same time it advertises why nothingness is always already defeated by God without consequently being "harmless" for God and cardinally, for the creature.

Nothingness remains defeated by God because its power to annihilate is not a power belonging to it in a positive sense. Rather, in its *antithetical anhypostatic* being, the power with which God has condemned it to ruin has an effect. Nothingness turns against God by seeking to carry over to creation its annihilation under God's No. It cannot do more than this. It can only be in annihilating and is only able to pull others along with it into ruin.

But in this way it is not something equivalent to the being of God. God "both in His revelation and in eternity, is the same."<sup>284</sup> Nothingness is the antithesis of all positivity and independence, of all constancy and order. God is in the abundance of his perfections.<sup>285</sup> Nothingness is only that which is void; it is privation itself. And above all, God is truly God in that he does not "remain satisfied with His own being in Himself." God's glory streams out over human creatures and shares with them all the good things that God himself has.<sup>286</sup> In its perverse way nothingness wants only itself. It annihilates and destroys by being against everything that God wills.

Nevertheless, nothingness remains something terrifying, something to be feared. For creatures are so relentlessly beset by the attacks of nothingness that God himself has to come to their rescue. Where nothingness is present, creatures have succumbed to it. And nothingness cannot rest. For if it comes to rest, it has at that same moment lost its *antithetically anhypostatic being*.

<sup>284</sup> CD II/1, p. 324.

<sup>285</sup> Ibid., p. 331.

<sup>286</sup> CD II/2, p. 168.

## NOTHINGNESS AS EVIL

According to Barth, from the fact that the "character of nothingness derives from its ontic peculiarity," it follows that "it is evil."<sup>287</sup> We were already required to develop our understanding of this character in reviewing the "ontic" of nothingness and can now summarize the matter. First, nothingness is evil because it is rejected by God, because it is only passing away under God's No and because it is present only as a negation of God's grace. Further, nothingness is evil because, in negating God's grace, it is bent solely upon destruction and disaster and only "is" by realizing its nature as nothingness destructively and with manifest disaster. It is evil, moreover, because the creature, subject to the realization of the character of nothingness as nothing, would be lost apart from God's saving action; but God alone can vanquish it and has vanquished it in the death of Jesus so that, as regards faith, nothingness can only be understood as that which is past. Finally, since faith knows evil as nothingness before God, it follows both that nothingness is absolutely *evil* because it "is" only as an *enemy* of God's grace, and that evil is absolutely *nothingness* because it "is" only as an enemy of God's *grace*.

## A NOTE ON THE DEVIL AND THE DEMONS

Barth did not develop demonology out of angelology, for the demons do not derive from the realm of the angels.<sup>288</sup> They are "nothingness in its dynamic, to the extent that it has form and power and movement"; they are nothingness "on the march and engaged in invasion and assault."<sup>289</sup>

All this could certainly also be said of the forms of nothingness as sin, death, and evil. But the demons are distinguished from these forms of nothingness because they take on no particular form when they break into creation. For this reason, just as one cannot define the devil—the "*independent non-being*,"<sup>290</sup> and "unity" of the demons<sup>291</sup>—so too one *cannot define* the demons.<sup>292</sup> The demons are never what they appear to be. In them the instability

<sup>287</sup> CD III/3, p. 353.

<sup>288</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 529; Barth dismissed the doctrine of the fall of the angels as "one of the bad dreams from the older dogmatics" (p. 531). Schleiermacher had already let go of this doctrine because he found no sufficient argument for such a "fall"—for if it were the case, then it would be presupposed that angels were already evil beforehand. The same argument also appears in Barth's work: "A true and orderly angel does not do what is ascribed to some angels in this doctrine" (cf. Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, §44, pp. 161–62; and CD III/3, p. 531).

<sup>289</sup> CD III/3, pp. 523–24.

<sup>290</sup> CD IV/1, p. 422; CD IV/3, p. 260.

<sup>291</sup> Cf. CD IV/2, p. 227.

<sup>292</sup> Barth calls the demons the "indefinable concretions of indefinable chaos" (*ibid.*, p. 231). "Concretion" here means simply "having an effect." But if, for instance, the devil were to be

and disorderliness of chaos plays itself out. So one really *cannot believe* in them as one does in God. Rather, faith in God includes disbelief in the demons. It *demythologizes* the demons as the *nonbeing* vanquished by God.<sup>293</sup> It un.masks them as a bewildering “mimicry” in which the demons act out the appearance of resembling God and belying God’s truth.<sup>294</sup>

Barth’s remarks about the devil and the demons lie at the limit of what can be said regarding nothingness. For precisely when the attempt is made to capture the devil and the demons fairly in the imagination, we are on the way toward hypostatizing nothingness.<sup>295</sup>

This tendency in Barth’s demonology is reigned in by the connection between contemplation of this reality and God’s revelation in Jesus Christ. This connection prevents demonology from becoming an apology for the concept of demons. At the same time it makes it possible to take nothingness seriously “in its dynamic.”<sup>296</sup> Nothingness in its dynamic has not been taken seriously by the certainty that demons “may exist.” When, where, and how nothingness is in action is made clear by the cross of Christ. Nothingness is in action in the forms of nothingness, in sin, death, and evil. But the demons do not exist in the sense of “form” of nothingness like sin, death, and evil, for they do not appear in any definite vesture of creation. For this reason—in conjunction with *Church Dogmatics* IV/3, pp. 260–61 and building upon *Church Dogmatics* III/3, p. 519ff.—we are able to conclude that in the various forms of nothingness, nothingness in its dynamic, namely as the devil and demons, is at work. All the forms of nothingness are “demonic” as such<sup>297</sup> because nothingness works in them as the devil and demons. Only in this way do the demons “exist.” There are no demons per se. But it is finally advisable not to designate

described as a “personified evil” (Lüthi, *Gott und das Böse*, p. 275), then he may not be portrayed as a “creature . . . at a superhuman and supraworldly level of being” (so argues Althaus, *Die christliche Wahrheit*, p. 392). For the devil is certainly not a person like a human being in the space of the world. He strives most mightily to appear to be a person, but according to his nature, he is completely and utterly without “personhood.”

<sup>293</sup> At the same time, with this understanding of “demythologization,” Barth sets himself off against a mere demythologization of the *concepts* of a past worldview (cf. *CD* III/3, p. 521). But we must also take into account that Barth himself did not speak of the demons in a phenomenological sense. On the contrary, he passed over the very concrete “mythical” concepts of the scriptures and satisfied himself with an interpretation of the reality denoted by them as “demons.” According to Barth, what is involved in the description of demons is primarily an issue of fact and not of ideas (cf. *CD* IV/2, p. 230). But is it necessary then, theologically speaking, to connect the reality of nothingness “in action” to the “concept” of demons?

<sup>294</sup> Cf. *CD* III/3, p. 527. [Trans.: The German reads *Affen-theater*, literally a “theater of apes.”]

<sup>295</sup> Cf. *CD* IV/3, p. 261: “[Theology] must not be betrayed into regarding him otherwise than as the hypostatized falsehood which can only stand in a negative relationship both to God and man.”

<sup>296</sup> *CD* III/3, p. 523.

<sup>297</sup> *CD* IV/2, p. 413.

the demons and the devil as "forms" of nothingness at all, since their nature consists precisely in lacking every form.

With this insight, discussion concerning their existence as "being" or "appearance" has become superfluous. They exist outside of this alternative but are real according to the divine judgment precisely in just such a way. Hence, assertion of their existence and description of their nature depend upon this judgment and not upon any conclusion drawn from analogy with the world.

#### EXCURSUS: PLOTINUS' DOCTRINE OF THE ORIGIN OF EVIL

Plotinus' theory of the origin of evil offers a few interesting parallels to Barth's doctrine of nothingness. This makes a differentiation requisite.

In order to ascertain what evil is and where it comes from, Plotinus starts with a definition of the good. The good is "that on which everything depends and to which all beings aspire; for they have it as their principle and need it: but it is without need, sufficient to itself, lacking nothing, the measure and bound of all things."<sup>298</sup> If the good is what exists absolutely and the origin of what exists, then evil can only belong among nonexisting things: "Non-being here does not mean absolute non-being but only something other than being . . . like an image of being or something still more non-existent."<sup>299</sup> One can only speak of evil in the manner of a homonym. Its being is nonbeing.<sup>300</sup>

According to Plotinus, this being as nonbeing is *matter*. It is the essence of evil, the first evil, or evil in itself. For it consists in a complete lack of the good. Nonetheless it is necessary in its way for the good: "Since not only the Good exists, there must be the last end to the process of going out past it, or if one prefers to put it like this, going down or going away: and this last, after which nothing else can come into being, is evil. Now it is necessary that what comes after the First should exist, and therefore that the Last should exist."<sup>301</sup> On the other hand Plotinus establishes the necessity of the good for evil from the nature of evil as a privation of the good: "But the nature which is opposed to all form is privation; but privation is always in something else and has no existence by itself."<sup>302</sup>

*Secondary* evil is to be distinguished from this *primary* evil. If the primary evil is darkness, then secondary evil is what is darkened.<sup>303</sup> Again, this second-

<sup>298</sup> Plotinus, "On What Are and Whence Come Evils," in *Plotinus*, §2,2-3, p. 281.

<sup>299</sup> *Ibid.*, §3,6ff., p. 283.

<sup>300</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, §5,10-11, pp. 289-90.

<sup>301</sup> *Ibid.*, §7,17ff., p. 299-300.

<sup>302</sup> *Ibid.*, §11,1ff., pp. 307-8. [Trans.: In the Greek text, privation is said to have "no hypostasis."]

<sup>303</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, §8,40-41, pp. 303-4.

ary evil comes about of necessity because the soul can only develop by entering into matter and so becoming a *mixture* of good and evil. Hence, "if anyone says that there is no evil at all in the nature of things, he must also abolish the good and have no object to aim at."<sup>304</sup> In sum, Plotinus says, "there must be good, and unmixed good, and that which is a mixture of bad and good, when it has a larger share of evil making itself totally evil," so that the good can unfold itself.

A number of Plotinus' ideas concerning evil resonate with Barth's thoughts in his doctrine of nothingness, which I here list: First, thinking on the basis of the good that unfolds itself; second, drawing a distinction between a primary and a secondary evil; third, defining evil as something nonexistent which nevertheless exists (like the shadow side of what is existing); fourth, defining the nature of evil in itself as negativity, as well as defining it as *privatio boni*; fifth, defining the being of evil as *anhypostatic* being; and finally, defining secondary evil as a mixture of primary evil with good entities.

Yet Barth's doctrine of nothingness must to be distinguished from Plotinus' theory of evil *ex radice* for the following reasons: first, nothingness cannot be legitimated in its being on the basis of the free event of grace which cannot be disposed over; second, Barth does not distinguish between nothingness and its forms in order to afford ontological possibility to an abstract essence of evil; third, Barth's definition of nothingness as something nonexistent is not grounded in a hierarchy of existents; fourth, the negativity of nothingness is not derived from any final position; fifth, nothingness as *privatio boni* is not subject to any necessity; sixth, the *anhypostatic* being of nothingness is antithetical and not grounded *enhypostatically* in the good; and last, nothingness only takes on form in creation in order to annihilate. In short, ideas which in Plotinus serve to prove the necessity of evil for the good serve in Barth to make clear the ontological impossibility and perverse reality of nothingness under God's No. From Barth's position, we must say that in Plotinus, evil has *not* become thematic *as evil*.

<sup>304</sup> Ibid., §15,3ff., p. 315.



## IV

### Human Sin and the Sinful Human

#### THE DOCTRINE OF RECONCILIATION AS THE LOCATION OF BARTH'S DOCTRINE OF SIN

The particular problem of the doctrine of sin is that in sin the perverse reality of nothingness and the reality of human being seem to coincide. So the question concerning *sin* becomes at once a question concerning *sinner*s. And the question concerning sinners has to clarify in particular how human being *qua* sinners not only *affects* our being as one of God's human persons, but also how it is *differentiated* from it.

According to Barth, both human sin and sinful human beings can only be recognized in the event of reconciliation.<sup>305</sup> It is precisely in this event that they work out their nature and are shown to be what they are. If sin and sinners have their essence in opposition to the reconciling grace of God, then just how the nature of sin and sinners is to be understood is decided by how the nature of reconciliation itself is understood.

The essence of reconciliation consists in the *action* by which God realizes his eternal covenant in time. This covenant is therefore the "presupposition of reconciliation."<sup>306</sup> Reconciliation can only come to be characterized as God's *reaction* to sin on the basis of this presupposition. Reconciliation is not conditioned by sin, because reconciliation is more than "information about God's dilemma."<sup>307</sup> Sin has only interrupted God's incessant action.<sup>308</sup> It is an

<sup>305</sup> Cf. above p. 12.

<sup>306</sup> Cf. CD IV/1, p. 22ff.

<sup>307</sup> Cf. CD II/2, p. 90. [Trans.: Barth's German has the more dramatic "*Verlegenheitsauskunft*."]

<sup>308</sup> The concepts of "incursion" (*Einbruch*) and "episode" (*Zwischenfall*) are employed together with Kierkegaard's anti-speculative concept of the "qualitative leap" by which sin comes into the world (cf. *The Concept of Anxiety*, ed. and trans. R. Thomte [Princeton: Princeton University Press,

“episode,” indeed the “original of all episodes.”<sup>309</sup> With respect to this incident, God’s primal “Yes” perseveres in reconciliation as a “notwithstanding” and a “despite.”<sup>310</sup>

This history of God’s *covenant* with human creatures is summarized in the event of the being of Jesus Christ.<sup>311</sup> So, according to Barth, the exposition of reconciliation is nothing more than an unfolding of christology.<sup>312</sup> The event of the *being* of Jesus Christ is the *act* of God’s reconciliation with the human. So it is the one being and act [*Tat-Sein*] of Jesus Christ that makes thematic sin and sinners as that which opposes this being and act. Their nature consists in the exact negation of this one being and act. Thus, in accordance with his christology, Barth divided his doctrine of sin in a way that aligns with the respective christological foundations of the doctrine of reconciliation. And in order to grasp the construction of Barth’s doctrine of sin we must acquaint ourselves with the basic contours of his christology.

In Barth’s view, the being of Jesus Christ occurs as being in the history of the God who becomes incarnate and of God’s assumption of the human. The subject of this event is the free and triune God. God graciously decides to take up the being and the nature of the *true human creature* into the mode of being of the Son as *true* God.<sup>313</sup> This decision brings the being of Jesus Christ

1980], pp. 111–12). The concept of “episode” is distinguished from that of the “leap” in Kierkegaard’s works because it is understood entirely on the basis of God’s gracious action which simply *condemns* the sin to be an “episode.”

<sup>309</sup> *CD* IV/1, p. 46. Barth’s use of the concept “episode” in relation to sin is not always clear: (a) at *CD* II/2, p. 97 he rejects the concept as a characterization of sin because God has from all eternity already decided the matter of sin, which means sin does not come about in an unforeseeable manner; (b) at *CD* IV/1, pp. 36, 46–47, 48, 68, 69, etc. he uses the concept to characterize sin in opposition to God’s original act of grace; (c) lastly, at *CD* IV/2, p. 380, Barth dissociates himself from an understanding of sin as an “episode” in the sense of it being a “point of transition,” for in this sense it is used to render human sinfulness harmless. Hence it is difficult to establish definitively “episode” as a concept in Barth’s work. I will make use of it only in the second sense (b), and consider (a) and (c) as attempts to demur from misunderstandings of the notion.

<sup>310</sup> Cf. *CD* IV/1, pp. 11, 71–73.

<sup>311</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 122–23. When J. F. Konrad distinguishes the covenant as a “specific relation to God” (*Abbild*, p. 122, note 23), he makes the covenant into an institution and misjudges the fact that God’s covenant consists precisely in God’s *history* with human creatures. This history is, in the first instance, the event of the being of Jesus Christ. It is the center of the event of the covenant (cf. *CD* IV/1, p. 122–23). For Konrad, it becomes a vehicle for the so-called covenant. But in this way all the *aporia* of infralapsarianism arrive on the scene. Konrad is forced into this position because he has interpreted Barth’s doctrine of election completely inadequately and so applied its concept of “covenant” abstractly into the “central event of the New Testament.”

<sup>312</sup> Cf. *CD* IV/1, p. 123.

<sup>313</sup> For a detailed account of this, see E. Jüngel, “The Royal Man: A Christological Reflection on Human Dignity in Barth’s Theology,” in *Karl Barth: A Theological Legacy*, trans. G. E. Paul (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), pp. 127–38.

into a *movement* which Barth describes under various distinct, though not separable, aspects.

The one being and act of Jesus Christ as *true God* is the first aspect of the history of reconciliation. Barth describes this aspect by coordinating elements of the traditional doctrine of the *status exinanitionis* with that of the *munus sacerdotale*. Jesus Christ in his *humiliation* is true God. He became obedient to his Father in order to judge the sinner "by judging Himself and dying in his place."<sup>314</sup> Precisely in this act he is and remains true God and Lord over himself and the human creature. In accordance with the judgment of God the Father on the obedience of his Son, the sinner is destroyed by this act and space is created for the existence of the new human creature reconciled to God.

Yet God abased himself in order to *exalt* the human being. This exaltation of the human by God is the second aspect of the history of God's reconciliation with the human. Barth describes this aspect by coordinating elements of the traditional doctrine of the *status exaltationis* with that of *munus regale*. The human creature exalted in reconciliation is the *true human*, Jesus. Human existence can only come into its truth in him. This is because—on the basis of his being taken up into God's own existence—Jesus alone is in truth "a man of God."<sup>315</sup> Jesus' human existence is the history of his exaltation by God. In this history, the man Jesus existed analogously to God the Father's mode of existence, existing as a "royal man" in his words and deeds up to his death on the cross.<sup>316</sup> But according to the Son's directive, all other humans become persons exalted and reconciled to God in the existence of this one man.<sup>317</sup>

Barth's description of the third aspect of the history of the existence of Jesus Christ is an interpretation of elements of the doctrine of the *munus propheticum*. Jesus Christ, true God and true human, makes the truth of his existence audible as he "speaks for himself . . . and creates knowledge of Himself."<sup>318</sup> As he himself is the truth, he is the light of life *par excellence*, a light that presses incessantly into the world.<sup>319</sup> The promise of the Spirit guarantees the coming of Jesus Christ as Reconciler and Redeemer to all people.<sup>320</sup> Even now, the Spirit causes human existence in the world to be existence in God's truth.

<sup>314</sup> CD IV/1, p. 157.

<sup>315</sup> On this, cf. the doctrine of *en-* and *an-hypostasis* which is of decisive significance for Barth's christology.

<sup>316</sup> Cf. CD IV/2, p. 155ff.

<sup>317</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 264ff.

<sup>318</sup> CD IV/3, p. 46.

<sup>319</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 237.

<sup>320</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 276ff.

Barth develops his doctrine of sin in the most stringently systematic way in keeping with these chief christological contours. This does not contradict the unsystematizable character of sin and nothingness which has already been established. First, sin is not systematized so much as the characterization of its reality is ordered under various aspects. This is indeed appropriate because on the cross of Christ, sin was revealed to be a reality which occurs in creation. Thus, we must characterize it according to rules that hold in creation for the description of reality from certain governing perspectives. Second, Barth's course of action is legitimated by the fact that he seeks to present sin as a contradiction to the *entire* event of reconciliation. In all its aspects, sin is one inexplicable and incalculable human opposition to the event of grace.

### UNBELIEF AS THE FUNDAMENTAL SIN OF THE HUMAN

In all its aspects, reconciliation aims at human *faith*. It is the only possible and necessary human correspondence to the event of reconciliation.<sup>321</sup> The rejection of the entire event of reconciliation is the fundamental human sin. Accordingly, the fundamental sin of the human creature is *unbelief*.<sup>322</sup> Barth's characterization of the basic human sin as unbelief has a range of consequences.

First, the being of humans as sinners cannot be separated from their acts of sin. The sinner is the "whole man, man in the unity of being and activity" in unbelief.<sup>323</sup> Therefore, the necessary distinction between the sinner and the sin must in no way give rise to the idea that sin is "merely external."<sup>324</sup> The question regarding whether the being of sinners is to be understood on the basis of their acts or the acts of sinners on the basis of their being can thus be set aside. In the first case, in accordance with Aristotelian ethics, not only must the fact that humans *are* evil be understood on the basis of their evil works, but so too must the fact that humans *are* good be understood on the basis of their good works (justification by works).<sup>325</sup> In the second case, however, sin threatens to become a kind of total human state. This seems to be a consequence of the church's doctrine of original sin. By contrast, the charac-

<sup>321</sup> Cf. *CD* IV/1, pp. 746–47; on Barth's concept of faith, see below p. 85.

<sup>322</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 415. In characterizing the fundamental sin as unbelief, Barth is following Luther in particular; cf. *Luther's Works*, vol. 35, edited by E. T. Bachman (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), p. 369; *Luther's Works*, vol. 14, edited by J. Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing, 1958), p. 84. For a detailed account of this, see P. Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, trans. by R. C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), p. 141ff.

<sup>323</sup> *CD* IV/1, p. 405.

<sup>324</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 405.

<sup>325</sup> Luther fought passionately against this: "*Non 'efficimur iusti iusta operando', sed iusti facti operamur iusta*" (A. Leitzmann and O. Clemen, eds., *Luthers Werke in Auswahl*, 8 vols. [Berlin: de Gruyter, 1959–67], pp. 16–17, 323). On this, cf. H. J. Iwand, *Glaubensgerechtigkeit nach Luthers Lehre*, 2nd ed. (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1951), pp. 50–51.

terization of the fundamental human sin as unbelief eliminates both of these one-sided accounts by endeavoring to understand the being of the sinner as an act of his or her sin. That is to say, human existence in unbelief is sin.

It follows from this, second, that there cannot be a programmatic distinction between a *peccatum originale* and the *peccata actualia* in the sense that *peccata actualia* could be graduated in relation to the *peccatum originale* according to the degree and quantity of its reprehensibility. In God's judgment, every sin is "worthy of death"<sup>326</sup> because every sin is rooted in unbelief. There certainly are different human sins. But the constant in all of them is unbelief. It is repeated in every form of sin.<sup>327</sup> And it is in fact repeated as concrete disobedience. Where there is unbelief, there is also transgression of God's commandment.<sup>328</sup>

Finally, understanding sin as unbelief draws sin away from any and all anonymous judgments. In and as unbelief, human sin is always the sin of concrete human persons. For God's judgment reads: "Thou art the man! This is what thou doest! This is what thou art! This is the result! . . . We are simply there as this man."<sup>329</sup>

## HUMAN PRIDE AND SLOTH

Our task in what follows cannot be to summarize Barth's doctrine of sin in all its detail. The chief thing is to present the main features of the way Barth

<sup>326</sup> CD IV/2, p. 493. However, according to the scholastic understanding, the only sins which are deadly are those "which separate the human creature from the spiritual life and thus bring about eternal punishment" (R. Seeberg, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte*, Band 3, 5th ed. [Graz: Akademische Druck- u. Verlagsanstalt, 1953], p. 428). Such sins can only be forgiven by grace. But *peccata venialia* do not separate the soul from God, and thus do not deserve eternal punishment.

<sup>327</sup> A distinction between *peccatum originale* and *peccata actualia*—which presupposes that the *peccata actualia* only repeat a certain *quantum* of the original sin—destroys this fact. Indeed, it was for this reason that Luther rejected the late scholastic thesis that concupiscence is only *formes peccati* but not sin itself (M. Luther, *Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 56 [Weimar: H. Böhlmann, 1883–], p. 366). This thesis presupposes that the sinner's act of will is free with respect to sin and therefore can only succumb to it in various degrees (cf. G. Biel, *Rectitudo naturalis voluntatis eius, scilicet: libertas, non corrumpitur per peccatum*, sent. II d. 30. q. 1a. 3, cited in H. Leitzmann et al., eds., *Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche*, 4th ed. [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1959], p. 53, note 2). On the basis of this presupposition the *Confutation* of the definition of original sin in *Augsburg Confession* II (cf. *ibid.*, p. 53) objected: "*Sine metu Dei, sine fide esse est culpa actualis; igitur negant esse culpam originale*" (p. 146f.). This was consistent. But it was precisely this presupposition that was disputed by *Augsburg Confession* II. For there the aim was to understand the whole person in all his or her acts as sinner.

<sup>328</sup> In this understanding of the fundamental human sin, Barth is in agreement with what Bultmann called the "genuine sin" of the human. Human beings do not want to receive their lives from God, but rather want "to trust in one's self as being able to procure life" (Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, p. 239). And with this, "he makes himself God" (Bultmann, "Liberal Theology and the Latest Theological Movement," in his *Faith and Understanding*, ed. R. Funk, trans. L. P. Smith [New York: Harper & Row, 1969], p. 46). But while for Barth this pride is only one aspect of fundamental sin, for Bultmann unbelief and pride appear to be identical.

<sup>329</sup> CD IV/1, p. 390.

proceeds so as to be able to discuss the problems that necessarily arise within his doctrine of sin.

To this end we will initially outline, in relative separation from one another, the paragraphs on the “pride and fall” of the human (*CD* IV/1, §60) and the “sloth and misery” of the human (*CD* IV/2, §65). These correspond to Barth’s material conception, since the history of reconciliation has been enacted in Jesus Christ’s humiliation and exaltation. Thus, in looking back to this completed history, Barth has set both paragraphs on sin in *Church Dogmatics* IV/1 and *Church Dogmatics* IV/2 in relation to each other, so that along with the paragraph on the “falsehood and condemnation” of the human (*CD* IV/3, §70) they form a relative unity. This fact is expressed formally in their parallel construction.

In this way, a parallelism also arises between the problems treated here and there. To avoid explaining these problems twice over, we will first present sin as pride and sloth, in order then to treat the fall and misery of the human being summarily. Only in chapter 5 does Barth’s understanding of sin as falsehood become an explicit theme of consideration, the reason being that this form of sin cannot be grasped until “overcoming sin” is thoroughly understood.

What, then, does Barth say of human pride? In the “mirror” of the reconciling act of the God who condescends in unceasing *humility* to the human creature, human sin becomes manifest as *pride*. Barth attempted to “survey” this sin from four perspectives.<sup>330</sup> First, even as God becomes like us, we want to be like God.<sup>331</sup> This human effort is *futile* and powerless because human beings do not possess the ontological possibility of becoming God. Nevertheless, this absurd effort is made and produces the *fact* of the human opposition against God. All the while humans *conceal* this fact from themselves by regarding their pride as the legitimate use of their freedom.

Second, even as God—the Lord—became a servant, humans—the servants—want to be Lord.<sup>332</sup> This human effort is *futile* and powerless because human beings do not possess the power to be the Lord. Nevertheless they *actually* play at the role of Lord, all the while *concealing* this absurd effort by regarding and passing off their pride as the legitimate use of their power.

Third, even as God, the Judge, allowed himself to be judged, humans want to be their own judge.<sup>333</sup> This human effort is *futile* and powerless because God has already judged and declared human presumptuousness to be unjust. Nevertheless, human beings *actually* play at the role of the judge and

<sup>330</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 418.

<sup>331</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 418–32.

<sup>332</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 432–45.

<sup>333</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 445–58.

in fact produce a world ripped apart by human self-righteousness, all the while *concealing* this absurd effort by regarding and passing off their own discrimination between justice and injustice as their having reached maturity.

Fourth and finally, even as God entered into the abyss in order to help the human, humans want to help *themselves*.<sup>334</sup> This human effort is *futile* and powerless because human beings have already been helped by God's self-abasement. Nevertheless, humans *actually* play the role of the titan, whether it be after the fashion of the atheist or that of a piety of works, while at the same time *concealing* this absurd effort by regarding and passing off their self-help as the true humanization of the human.

So much for pride, but what of sloth? In the light of God's reconciling act, which constitutes human beings as those who are reconciled and exalted in Jesus Christ, human sin manifests itself in the completely unheroic, trivial form of sloth.<sup>335</sup>

Since human sloth contradicts the nature of human being ontologically established by the existence of the man Jesus, Barth portrays this failure in the human relationship to God, in relations between fellow human beings, in the relationship humans have to both their own constitution as creatures and their temporal-historical limitedness. Barth gives voice to the fact that human failure in all of these relationships is total and does so by immediately setting each particular human failure into specific relation to failures in the other relationships (we will not present the consequence of each form of sloth separately).

First, human sloth takes shape as stupidity.<sup>336</sup> It is stupid for men and women to *neglect* to participate in the knowledge of God established for them in Jesus Christ and to *persist* in the folly and ignorance of God. Such stupid persistence on the part of human beings is *futile* since humans can never elude God's illuminating light. Nevertheless, stupidity is the actual *fact* of opposition to God, even as human beings *conceal* this fact by regarding and passing off their stupidity as wisdom.

Second, human sloth becomes actual as inhumanity.<sup>337</sup> Inhuman persons *neglect* to be neighbourly human beings in accordance with God's direction and *persist* in isolation and hostility toward their fellow humans. Such inhuman obstinacy on the part of human beings is *futile* and powerless since it cannot annul the human vocation to exist as neighbors which God has given. Nevertheless, such inhumanity is an actual *fact* that threatens humanity with destruction, even though humans *conceal* this fact by regarding and passing off their inhumanity as impartiality.

<sup>334</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 458–78.

<sup>335</sup> Cf. *CD* IV/2, p. 403.

<sup>336</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 409–32.

<sup>337</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 432–52.

Third, human sloth is manifest in dissipation.<sup>338</sup> Human beings *neglect* to be the soul of their bodies in a complete manner in accordance with God's direction and *persist* in existing as "spiritless flesh." Such human effort is *futile* since it cannot change the structural determination of human existence. Nevertheless, human dissipation is an actual *fact* which threatens to disintegrate human nature even as men and women *conceal* this fact from themselves by pretending and holding out their freedom and place within nature as the pretext for their dissipation.

Finally, human sloth takes shape as anxiety.<sup>339</sup> Anxious humans *neglect* to exist as persons in time as it is graciously limited by God and *persist* in the attempt to master their lives themselves as those full of anxiety. Human anxiety is *futile* since the object of anxiety has already been taken away from the human by God. Nevertheless, human anxiety is an actual *fact* which draws death into the present of human persons even as they ever *conceal* this fact behind either dutiful work or resignation.

Of what significance are such characterizations of sin? In portraying sin as pride and sloth Barth is taking up traditional concepts. The *superbia* and the *amour sui* had, for example, been regarded as basic sins by Augustine<sup>340</sup> as well as by Thomas.<sup>341</sup> After unbelief, the Reformers (especially Luther) adjudged pride and sloth to be the source of all sins.<sup>342</sup> This evaluation has its particular New Testament basis in the Pauline contrast between the *righteousness of God* and *one's own righteousness from the law* (cf. Rom. 1:17; Phil. 3:9) as well as in the Pauline view of the relationship between *spirit* and *flesh* (cf. Rom. 8:2ff.).

Human beings *pridefully* want to achieve their own righteousness and even to be God in God's stead.<sup>343</sup> The "wisdom of the serpent" with its promise "*eritis sicut deus*" is at the root of this attitude. Sinners bring their pride into play as they play God's word off against itself.<sup>344</sup> They do so by misusing the law in order

<sup>338</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 452–67.

<sup>339</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 467–83.

<sup>340</sup> Cf. Augustine, *The City of God Against the Pagans*, ed. and trans. R. W. Dyson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), XIV, 13–14 (pp. 608–11); and "The Spirit and the Letter," in *Augustine: Later Works*, trans. J. Burnaby (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1955), ch. 7 (p. 199).

<sup>341</sup> Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. the Fathers of the English Dominican Province, revised by D. J. Sullivan, *Great Books of the Western World*, vol. 20 (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1952), II.1.q77a4, II.1.q84a2 (pp. 148–49, 175–76). The Thomistic distinction between sin as *aversio a Deo* and *conversio ad creaturas* corresponds to Barth's distinction between pride and sloth, but does so only formally. For Barth does not intend this distinction to facilitate a differing assessment of levels of divine punishment for sin (as it does in Thomas).

<sup>342</sup> Cf. Luther, *Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* 3, p. 486; and 5, p. 28ff., 564; as well as J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. J. T. McNeil, trans. F. L. Battles, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960) II.1 (p. 241f.).

<sup>343</sup> Cf. CD IV/1, pp. 421, 423, 434ff., 448–49, 462–63, 465–66, etc.

<sup>344</sup> Cf. E. Fuchs, "Existenziale Interpretation von Römer 7:7–12 und 12–13," in his *Glaube und Erfahrung*, vol. 3 of *Gesammelte Aufsätze* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1965), p. 393.

to establish their own righteousness.<sup>345</sup> To this extent human pride is the specifically *legalistic* form of human sin—that is, that form which misuses God's law.

In sloth, humans undercut their being *qua* human persons by persisting as sinners. To slothful humans, it is evident that God's law—which, in pride, they pretend to keep—does not actually apply to them (cf. Rom. 2:17ff.). To this extent human sloth is the specifically *antinomian* form of sin.<sup>346</sup>

In both of these forms, sin is *one movement* against the history of reconciliation. This unity is manifest in Barth's theology by fact that all particular kinds of pride and sloth share the same marks of sin. The first of these marks is that human sin is always *futile*. It is an exponent of a reality which God has already destroyed and which cannot countermand the work of God's grace. Thus, in relation to sin, there may be "serious concern . . . but it cannot and must not give rise to any final doubt."<sup>347</sup> Further, the futility of sin does not inhibit its *actually* occurring. Sin represents "a menacing of the whole work of God, the whole world as created by Him, a menacing which in its impotence is quite intolerable to God Himself."<sup>348</sup> Third, while God does not make sin harmless, sin casts itself as harmless in all its forms. It conceals its true face and thus always seems ambiguous. For this reason we cannot even characterize sin as a phenomenon in and of itself. God's judgment alone brings it into its futile clarity. As a futile, actual, concealed movement against God's grace, sin is human opposition against both God and other human beings. By perverting the relationship to God, sin also perverts the very existence of men and women themselves. Conversely, humans who exist in the perversion of their being are necessarily those who have turned away from God. Hence human pride and sloth must, of necessity, end with the fall and misery of human beings.

#### EXCURSUS: THE INDISPENSABLE CHARACTER OF THE OLD TESTAMENT FOR BARTH'S DOCTRINE OF SIN

Barth explicates every form of human pride and sloth with a story from the Old Testament. The Old Testament is as essential and necessary for an under-

<sup>345</sup> Cf. above p. 12.

<sup>346</sup> A theology oriented to the theology of Paul in particular will place the primary accent on sin in its legalistic form (e.g., R. Bultmann, E. Gogarten, but also W. Elert and P. Althaus). By contrast, a theology oriented primarily to Christian subjectivity sets to the fore sin in its antinomian form. The latter evaluation of sin achieved a particular place in theology by virtue of nineteenth-century philosophy as well as by virtue of Schleiermacher's theology. Of course, the "feeling of absolute dependence" is not an expression of human passivity in relation to God, but rather of humans' highest activity toward God. Sin as the neglect or slackening of this activity must necessarily then be marked by this passive character.

<sup>347</sup> CD IV/1, p. 408.

<sup>348</sup> Ibid., p. 411.

standing of human sin as it is for an understanding of the history of reconciliation. For the event of God's grace presupposed the history of the people of Israel as an indispensable "pre-history" of the fulfillment of the covenant and as the time of expectation of Jesus Christ.

Because the Old Testament is a witness of this time—which from the outset is related to the time of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ—Barth can only understand the Old Testament on the basis of Jesus Christ: ". . . as such and for itself, the Old Testament is not a reality at all."<sup>349</sup> Only insofar as it attests to the history to which it owes itself does it speak of real history. And the circumstances of the case are such that God's revelation in Jesus Christ does not merely involve some idea but rather involves the completion of a concrete history. This is the history of God turning in free grace toward human creatures and of human creatures who turn away from God and for whom he now becomes distant, hidden God.<sup>350</sup> Sinners are men and women of the covenant. "The Old Testament was needed to testify this because the Old Testament alone attests God's election, and it is only in the light of God's election that we see who and what is man. . . ."<sup>351</sup>

Jesus Christ has become a human being "in unlimited solidarity with . . . the manifestly *sinful* humanity of Israel."<sup>352</sup> God elected him "on the basis of the covenant."<sup>353</sup> But the men and women of the covenant are Israelite men and women, sinful and so rejected by God. Thus, Jesus Christ *had to* die on the cross.<sup>354</sup>

As regards the doctrine of sin, it follows from all this that the Old Testament is the necessary, indispensable, and concrete *commentary* on the knowledge of sin acquired in Jesus Christ. Without the Old Testament we overlook

<sup>349</sup> CD I/2, p. 89.

<sup>350</sup> Both these aspects of the history of the Old Testament characterize current hermeneutical discussion surrounding the Old Testament (cf. G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 2, trans. D. M. G. Stalker [New York: Harper & Row, 1965], p. 319ff.; the anthology edited by C. Westermann, *Essays on Old Testament Hermeneutics*, trans. J. L. Mays [Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1963]; G. Klein, "Individualgeschichte und Weltgeschichte bei Paulus. Eine Interpretation ihres Verhältnisses im Galaterbrief," *Evangelische Theologie* 24 [1964], p. 126ff.; H. Conzelmann, "Fragen an Gerhard Von Rad," *Evangelische Theologie* 24 [1964], p. 113ff.; G. von Rad, "Antwort auf Conzelmanns Fragen," *Evangelische Theologie* 24 [1964], p. 388ff.). Barth is able to move this discussion beyond the alternative between viewing the New Testament as the continuation or end in the historical sense of the Old Testament. For Barth sees both sides of the alternative as originally together. Seeing these together in this way is made explicit in the statement "the Word became flesh." That is to say, a new history of grace came about in the midst of the old history of sin. God gave the old history of sin a gracious end in order to give it a new beginning as a history under grace. To this extent, God brings the old history back once again to its original beginning under the promise of grace.

<sup>351</sup> CD IV/1, p. 171.

<sup>352</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 172.

<sup>353</sup> CD I/2, p. 92.

<sup>354</sup> *Ibid.*

sin's illumination in the revelation of Jesus Christ and fall into the danger of entertaining any old daydream regarding sin.

### THE HUMAN FALL AND MISERY

For Barth, *human being in sin* is not an independent consequence of an established concept of sin because such "being in sin" is only visible in inescapable opposition to the event of the being of Jesus Christ. Human creatures *fall* at the point at which Jesus Christ humbled himself for them. They remain inert in the *misery* from which the Royal Man would desire to remove them.<sup>355</sup>

Hence what is really at stake is the human person Paul described in Romans 7:7ff. as a person under the law. Barth did not draw upon this text in explicating his remarks concerning the fall and misery of the human creature. For akin to Luther,<sup>356</sup> Barth understands this text to be a witness to the reality of *simul iustus et peccator*. In fact, Paul certainly speaks here from the point of view of faith.<sup>357</sup> Paul, however, is not describing the situation of the Christian, but rather aiming to defend the (indispensable) law of God against the reproach that it bears the guilt for human sin.<sup>358</sup> The blame for death lies with the sinner, not the law.<sup>359</sup> Sin is the *violation* of God's law. And sinners cannot flee from this law; they must exist under it nevertheless. This they do by sinning. In Romans 7:13–14, Paul describes this existence from the point of view of faith as the conflict between human persons' actual existence and their ontological vocation to be men and women of God. Paul is analyzing not an internal, subjective conflict but the objective situation of human beings under the law.

In our view, the result of this analysis accords precisely with what Barth characterizes as the fall and misery of humans. The human fall is an event in the misuse of the law. Human misery consists in the inescapably actual contradiction of human existence by human being. The law holds men and women firmly in this situation so that God's grace and, therefore, life can come to sinners in Jesus Christ.

Barth would have been better able to demonstrate the adequacy of his doctrine of sin to Scripture if he had connected it with a proper exegesis of

<sup>355</sup> Cf. CD IV/2, p. 483.

<sup>356</sup> Cf. P. Althaus, *Paulus und Luther über den Menschen*, 4th ed. (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1963), p. 50ff.; W. Joest, "Paulus und das lutherische *Simul Iustus et Peccator*," *Kerygma und Dogma* 1 (1955), pp. 269–320.

<sup>357</sup> Cf. Bultmann, "Christ the End of the Law," in *Essays*, p. 36ff.

<sup>358</sup> Cf. R. Bultmann, "Romans 7 and the Anthropology of Paul," in *Existence and Faith: Shorter Writings of Rudolf Bultmann*, trans. S. Ogden (New York: Meridian, 1968), p. 147ff.

<sup>359</sup> Cf. Fuchs, *Glaube und Erfahrung*, p. 374.

Romans 7. In any event, Barth actually developed the content of Romans 7 in his doctrine of the fall and misery of the human being.

In what follows we understand the fall of the human as entry into the *status corruptionis* and the misery of the human as existence in the *status corruptionis*. In so doing we accentuate something that remains ambiguously in the background in Barth's work, namely that the misery of the human is nothing else than the continuation and result of the fall of the human. In short, human sin entails guilt.

Human pride and sloth are "absurd" and "inexcusable"<sup>360</sup> because God's act of forgiving sinners has actually taken away any and all reason for sin.<sup>361</sup> But sinners do not want this forgiveness. Thus, their responsibility for their sin is indisputable. There is no sphere of their existence in which they are not responsible for their sin. Their sin is always guilt.

But because it is only when they reject God's grace—which always holds good for them—that men and women are guilty, God holds them to their guilt in "the alien form" of wrath.<sup>362</sup> Subject to God's wrath, sinners must be what they, in their sin, want to be. In this way the path to God's grace is obstructed for sinners. They cannot make amends for their sin, for "to sin is to do that which only God can put right."<sup>363</sup> This, according to Barth, is the *momentousness* of human guilt.

So Barth does not conceive that men and women are guilty on the basis of their capacity to become guilty. Kant's insight that human evil—even as an in-born propensity—could only have the character of guilt as an intelligible human act has certainly made the question about the degree to which sin might lie in human freedom decisive in theology.<sup>364</sup> However, under "freedom" here is understood that both the *possibility of evil* (of falling away from God) together with the possibility and obligation for the good come about by virtue of human self-determination.<sup>365</sup>

For Barth, such a notion is out of the question. Whoever derives sin from such "freedom of choice" has already excused it.<sup>366</sup> And sin is absolutely inexcusable; it is without excuse: "It has, therefore no possibility—we cannot

<sup>360</sup> Cf. CD IV/1, p. 489.

<sup>361</sup> Ibid., p. 487.

<sup>362</sup> Ibid., p. 490.

<sup>363</sup> Ibid., p. 491. To this extent, sin and guilt are not to be separated. Such a separation can only be sought if one intends to be able to separate sin as an act of freedom from the sinfulness of nature. See, for example, R. Rothe, *Theologische Ethik*, Band 3, 3rd ed. (Wittenberg: Zimmermann, 1870), p. 60: In contrast to their sin "as an act of personal self-determination," human beings are not responsible for "real sinfulness." This distinction finds its way into the majority of dogmatics of the nineteenth century, but also of the twentieth century.

<sup>364</sup> Cf. I. Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Mere Reason*, in *Religion and Rational Theology*, ed. and trans. A. W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 76ff.

<sup>365</sup> J. Müller, *The Christian Doctrine of Sin*, vol. 2, pp. 123–24.

<sup>366</sup> Cf. CD IV/1, p. 410.

escape this difficult formula—except that of the absolutely impossible.”<sup>367</sup> And yet Barth speaks of a “certain reversionary tendency” to nothingness on the part of the human creature.<sup>368</sup> This assertion needs to be explained. What is the relation between creaturely freedom and the fall of humanity?

The church’s doctrine of original sin restricted the problem of sin’s incursion into the world to the beginning of the history of humanity. It asked to what extent *Adam* was struck by sin. Subsequently, for humanity in the wake of Adam, the problem was only posed in a relative way. It was maintained that sin passed to other human beings through reproduction and was attributed to them as guilt.<sup>369</sup> Though this was not the intention, it became impossible to think of sin as a “radical and therefore comprehensive and total act” of the human<sup>370</sup> when its incursion was understood simply to be “something that takes place in the world.”<sup>371</sup> In Barth’s judgment, the concept of “heredity” dissolves the concept of “sin,” and the concept of “sin” dissolves the concept of “heredity.”<sup>372</sup> The fall is not the event of a prehistoric time; it is an event which befalls every human—as Adam before us.

Once this is taught, it is no longer feasible to hold the doctrine of the so-called “original human state” preceding human sin. Furthermore, human nature, created as good, is no “state” or “condition.” In Barth’s view it is founded—as already indicated<sup>373</sup>—in the event of the correspondence of God and the human creature. In this correspondence, human being is a being in *freedom*. This freedom establishes human being.<sup>374</sup> Inasmuch as a correspondence arises between God and human creatures, human beings are free persons. Freedom is not merely a possibility of human existence; nor certainly is it a *habitus*. There is “no other freedom than that which is exercised in the

<sup>367</sup> Ibid.

<sup>368</sup> CD IV/2, p. 398.

<sup>369</sup> Augustine taught this with appeal to Rom. 5:12; Ps. 15:7, and John 3:5 (cf. Gross, *Geschichte des Erbsündendogmas*, p. 257ff.). Both the Reformers (cf., e.g., *Augsburg Confession II* and *Formula of Concord*, Ept. I, in H. Leitzmann et al., eds., *Die Bekenntnisschriften*, p. 53; pp. 770–71), as well as Trent (cf. H. Denzinger and A. Schönmetzer, eds., *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, 35th ed. [Freiberg: Verlag Herder, 1973], §§1510–16 [pp. 366–68]) followed him in this.

<sup>370</sup> This holds true for both Augustine (cf. Gross, *Geschichte des Erbsündendogmas*, p. 327) and in many places also for Luther (cf. W. Elert, *Morphologie des Luthertums*, vol. 1 of *Theologie und Weltanschauung des Luthertums hauptsächlich im 16. und 17. Jahrhundert* [Munich: Beck, 1958], p. 25). However, contrast to this Melancthon, who actually identifies *peccatum originale* and *peccata actualia* in his *Loci Communes* of 1521 (cf. *Loci Communes*, trans. L. J. Satre, in *Melancthon and Bucer*, ed. W. Pauck [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969], p. 31).

<sup>371</sup> CD IV/1, p. 500. [Trans.: In the first phrase, Barth’s German speaks of an “innerweltlichen Pragmatik.”]

<sup>372</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 500–1.

<sup>373</sup> Cf. above p. 45.

<sup>374</sup> Cf. CD III/2, p. 194.

event or act of human life.”<sup>375</sup> Freedom is the *language event* of correspondence between God and the human creature, an event made possible *extra nos* and which only becomes real in the facticity of the event itself.

Humans are created as free subjects for the sake of the event of this freedom. They can set their existence as subject in motion in creaturely relationships and structures which correspond to the event of free grace. God gracefully requires such free subjects for himself, so that the event of the covenant of grace is really the event of correspondence between the free God and free human creatures.<sup>376</sup>

It follows from this that human freedom in relation to God (as well as to other human beings and to ourselves) *cannot be a free choice* between “obedience and disobedience.” Freedom is “*never freedom to sin*.”<sup>377</sup> It is exactly in freedom that there is “no *de iure* of sin.”<sup>378</sup>

Nevertheless, Barth can speak even of “ambiguous freedom” in the face of sin,<sup>379</sup> indeed he can speak of the *possibilities* of obedience and disobedience.<sup>380</sup> In doing so, he has in mind the fact that God actually commands men and women to obey, but that such obedience “is not made *physically necessary*”; that God actually forbids disobedience, but that such disobedience “is not made *physically impossible*.”<sup>381</sup> However, even here Barth is not abstracting from the grounding of his understanding of the nature of freedom. That is to say, in his exegesis of Genesis 2:16–17, Barth would like to understand the human answer to God’s command as a fulfillment and correspondence not only to the *Yes* but also to God’s *No* as well. God’s prohibition against

<sup>375</sup> Ibid., p. 195.

<sup>376</sup> In the course of his analysis of Barth’s concept of freedom, U. Hedinger abstains from pointing to the *analogia fidei seu relationis* as the ground for Barth’s doctrine of freedom (even when countless correspondences which play a role in Barth’s doctrine of freedom are listed. Cf. Hedinger, *Der Freiheitsbegriff in der Kirchlichen Dogmatik Karl Barths*, Zurich: Zwingli Verlag, 1962). For this reason Hedinger gets into the danger of flogging to death Barth’s consistent doctrine of freedom. His conclusion is then that “freedom is not a rational concept” (ibid., p. 121). This appears in the inconsistency of Barth’s remarks about “creaturely freedom” and the *libertas christiana* (p. 93ff.). Where the *analogia fidei seu relationis* no longer remains the basic premise for Barth’s remarks in anthropology, the relation of creation and covenant must necessarily remain unclear. The grounding relation of covenant and creation, and the eventfulness of this relation, can only be expressed with difficulty by Hedinger’s inadequate picture of both “concentric circles,” the larger of which (creaturely freedom) encompasses the smaller (*libertas christiana*) and which both have Jesus Christ as their center.

<sup>377</sup> CD III/2, p. 197.

<sup>378</sup> K. Barth, *Das Geschenk der Freiheit. Grundlegung evangelischer Ethik. Theologische Studien* 39 (Zollikon-Zurich: Evangelische Verlag, 1953), p. 9.

<sup>379</sup> Cf. CD II/1, p. 626.

<sup>380</sup> Cf. CD III/1, p. 257.

<sup>381</sup> Cf. ibid., p. 263.

eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil shows human beings that to which they are to say “No.” Hence, it does not show them a possibility but rather that possibility which is ruled out for their human existence. The emphasis here must not lie—as unfortunately actually happens with Barth in this context—on the “possible,” but on the “impossible.” God is warning human creatures about nothingness; God is urging them to preserve their freedom as a “Yes” to God and a “No” to nothingness.<sup>382</sup> “Some play is given to man”<sup>383</sup> for preserving this freedom; however, “no play is given him on the edge of the abyss.”<sup>384</sup> This “room to play” is the place God has ontologically appointed to human beings for the event of their freedom. Given this, human freedom is not a possibility in logical contradiction to reality; rather, as *the* possibility, freedom is the *true reality* of human existence.

But such “room to play” must be understood—more explicitly and more clearly than is the case in Barth’s work—as the *time* given by God to the human. Humans receive from God *time for freedom*. Temporality and freedom are coordinating theological concepts. Indeed, Barth cannot even think of God’s eternity in a timeless way. Barth conceives of God as “supremely temporal” as the simultaneity [*Ineinander*] of all modes of time and to this extent as the “source of all time.”<sup>385</sup> Because God has time, God is therefore free to take time for human creatures and to give time to them. In doing so, however, God does not make humans into God. Rather, God differentiates human beings from himself by allowing them to live in the sequence of the modes of time as the proving of their freedom. As room given for the enactment of human freedom, human time is the correspondence God makes possible to the time God makes within his own eternity as room for his own freedom. As such, it is the human creatures’ proper time. And in this, their own proper time, their freedom may be their *own freedom* as well.

Now it becomes clear why God did not make “either obedience physically necessary nor disobedience physically impossible” for humans. Namely, human freedom would in that case have been timeless—that is, not freedom at all but rather “a higher coercion.” God’s grace is greater than such coercion. It affords human beings in *their* time their own proper opportunity to give an answer to God in freedom.

The problem of theodicy is thus not a problem for evangelical theology at all, for it rests on a misunderstanding of what “God’s grace” is. God’s grace *remains* grace, because it *waits for* the “Yes” of the free human being. This is

<sup>382</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 264.

<sup>383</sup> *CD* III/1, p. 263.

<sup>384</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 264.

<sup>385</sup> *CD* III/2, p. 437.

the *risky endeavor* that God has entered into with human creatures. This risky endeavor will end with the death of the Son of God. But God in his grace determined that this should be so from the beginning. God defeats every reproach against grace with the "Yes" to death on the cross.

If, therefore, sin cannot be derived from "what God positively willed . . . with the freedom given to [the human creature],"<sup>386</sup> and if human creatures sin nonetheless, then they are using their freedom by *misusing* and *perverting* it. They are not actually ontologically determined for this, but neither are they simply ontically incapable of it. Humans are capable of contradicting their ontological determination within their existence. Through sin, they allow the ontological impossibility of their human existence to manifest itself ontically. Yet the fact that it can appear ontically as an ontological impossibility is not grounded in sin itself. This is a consequence of God's grace which bequeaths to men and women free responsibility for their own existence. Such responsibility is not ontically protected against its perversion, for if it were it would no longer be responsibility. It is only protected from misuse by sin when they use it as a responsibility given to them by God.<sup>387</sup>

So there is no other "explanation" for the misuse of freedom by human sin than the inexplicable character of sin itself. Human beings sin as those who are participants in grace. Nevertheless, their sin can be traced back neither to God nor to an independent act of nothingness. Furthermore, it still remains true that "sin came into the world by sinning." Barth makes advantageous use of this remark of Bultmann's<sup>388</sup> when he understands sin to be an *ontological* impossibility. Thereby, even the thought of an *ontological* human "susceptibility" to nothingness is ruled out.

God claims human persons *entirely*. And sin consists in the renunciation of God by the *entire* human person. According to Barth, the "absolutely comprehensive transforming" of the human situation in the event of reconciliation reveals that the *corruption* of human existence by sin "is both radical and total."<sup>389</sup> But Barth asserts the radical and total corruption of human nature only on the basis of the presupposition that humans *cannot* become "ontologically godless."<sup>390</sup> Human "godlessness may be very strong," but it cannot "make" God "a 'manless' God," nor do men and women cease "to be the creature[s]"

<sup>386</sup> CD III/1, pp. 266–67.

<sup>387</sup> The corrective to this statement is Barth's understanding of the sinlessness of Jesus, which does not consist in a physical incapacity to sin, but in the *act* of the life of Jesus (cf. CD IV/2, pp. 92–93).

<sup>388</sup> Cf. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, pp. 251–52.

<sup>389</sup> CD IV/1, p. 492.

<sup>390</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 480.

and covenant partner[s] of God.”<sup>391</sup> Human beings remain human even in sin. For they have not “fallen lower than the depth to which God humbled Himself for him in Jesus Christ. But God in Jesus Christ did not become a devil or nothingness.”<sup>392</sup>

This does not provide an excuse; rather, it gives “supreme precision and point”<sup>393</sup> to the position of the sinner: “. . . under the authority of the Word of God and in possession of his human capacity” the sinner is condemned “to exist before God as the one who resists.”<sup>394</sup> Subject to God’s wrath, sinners must be what they do.<sup>395</sup> Barth’s assertion that human beings cannot become sinners ontologically seems to contradict the claim that humans are *totally* sinful. This contradiction finds expression in particular in Barth’s use of the concept of “being.” Statements about human being are ontological statements. In this sense Barth speaks of the full, unaltered humanity of humans and means thereby the “good nature which was created by God.”<sup>396</sup> Yet, on the other hand, he also emphasizes that the sinner has his “*own* being”:<sup>397</sup> “he sins, but more than that, he is a sinner.”<sup>398</sup> According to Barth’s presuppositions this cannot be an ontological statement. Hence Barth’s meaning—as shown above<sup>399</sup>—is that human beings are sinners *ontically* “in the whole fulfillment of [their] existence.”<sup>400</sup>

If the “good nature” of human beings is not a condition in and of itself,<sup>401</sup> it certainly only exists at all insofar as it is lived out by men and women. Persons who do not live out their being are not human persons; they have no being. Hence, if humans are only human insofar as they live out their good nature, and if they live out their good nature *only* as those who sin, then they only possess their good nature as a perverted, totally corrupted nature.

<sup>391</sup> Ibid.

<sup>392</sup> Ibid., pp. 480–81.

<sup>393</sup> Ibid., p. 482.

<sup>394</sup> Ibid.

<sup>395</sup> Barth only employs the concept of the *punishment* of sin hesitantly, because this concept would transpose the entire event of reconciliation into one viewed from the perspective of the elimination of abstract punishments. Reconciliation would subsequently become the function of the wrathful God (cf. CD IV/1, p. 253). Hence, Barth would sooner speak of the consequences of sin, of the “evil fruit” and the “unavoidable fate” of the sinner (cf. CD IV/2, p. 484).

<sup>396</sup> CD IV/1, p. 492.

<sup>397</sup> Ibid., p. 495.

<sup>398</sup> Ibid.

<sup>399</sup> Cf. above p. 67.

<sup>400</sup> CD IV/2, p. 489.

<sup>401</sup> On this cf. also Z. Trtik, “Der Personbegriff im dogmatischen Denken Karl Barths,” *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie* 5 (1963), p. 263. According to Barth, therefore, we cannot distinguish between nature in itself and the person (or personality) of the human creature so that we might on this basis assert only the corruption of the person, as does R. Prenter, *Schöpfung und Erlösung. Dogmatik I* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1958), p. 264.

Accordingly, Barth can only think of the corruption of human being or nature as the “*event* of their corruption.”<sup>402</sup> No sphere of human existence is exempted from the event of this corrupting. The human creature is “godless precisely in the good and as good . . . and has fallen prey to nothingness precisely in his essentiality.”<sup>403</sup>

In sum: the *being* of the *human* creature *qua* sinner remains ontologically constituted by the grace of God. Humans constitute their *being* as *sinners* by sinning. Several things follow from this. First, there is no perennially good “relic or core of goodness which persists in man in spite of his sin”;<sup>404</sup> the being of sinners does not relate to human being as one *quantum* to another. Humans remain totally human and are totally sinners. Second, there is no “time in which man is not a transgressor.”<sup>405</sup> And third, there are “in the whole sphere of human activities . . . no exceptions to the sin and corruption of man,” for under God’s grace there are “no spheres which are neutral, but only spheres of decision,” and humans have chosen in favor of sin.<sup>406</sup>

The momentousness of human guilt is reflected in the enacted existence of their being: sinful humans can no longer turn to God of their own accord and by their own power. Indeed, through the misuse of freedom, the *liberum arbitrium* given humans by God becomes a *servum arbitrium*.

<sup>402</sup> CD IV/2, p. 489.

<sup>403</sup> CD IV/1, p. 493. Cf. Bultmann, “The Eschatology of the Gospel of John,” in *Faith and Understanding*, p. 169: “It is clear then that *man’s ‘being-world’* is always his own chosen possibility—not a natural state but a fallenness.” Barth concurs with Bultmann that the ontological structure of human existence cannot be annihilated by sin, but by “ontological structure” he understands something different than does Bultmann. For this reason, Barth must relate sin’s corruption to this structure in a different way than Bultmann’s approach requires. Concretely enacted sin also affects that sphere that Bultmann calls “nature” because God has willed human beings in this nature.

<sup>404</sup> CD IV/1, p. 493.

<sup>405</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 495.

<sup>406</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 496. Contemporary “christocentric” Catholic interpretation of the relation of nature and grace is unable to assert such a corruption of human nature. Von Balthasar, for example, assumes that God’s grace in Jesus Christ presupposes the creation (cf. *The Theology of Karl Barth*, p. 226). Yet, from this presupposition he looks at nature in relative independence and elaborates a formal concept of nature by means of the *analogia entis*. This formal concept states that creatures are “not completely dissimilar” to the Creator (p. 229). In fact, there is no such nature to be found. It only exists when it is filled with supernatural elements and is illumined by God’s grace (cf. pp. 231–32). This “supernatural summons, orientation and elevation of nature” (von Balthasar, *Karl Barth. Darstellung und Deutung seiner Theologie*, p. 299 [Trans.: this phrase does not appear in the English abridgment, cf. *The Theology of Karl Barth*, p. 232]) cannot be lost by the human creature. Thus, they also possess the capacity to grasp the supernatural goal. For a detailed discussion of von Balthasar’s thought in comparison with other Catholic views of the relation of nature and grace, see U. Kühn, *Natur und Gnade. Untersuchungen zur deutschen katholischen Theologie der Gegenwart*, 2nd ed. (Berlin: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1962), p. 127ff. Because nature includes within itself elements of grace, it cannot be completely perverted. For Barth, a revival of the honor of the sinful human creature such as this is impossible, in virtue of his understanding of the *analogia fidei*.

Adopting this view, Barth excludes from the explanation of the problem of human free will the concept of the *liberum arbitrium* as it became thematic in the debate between Erasmus and Luther. According to Barth, the *liberum arbitrium* that Erasmus asserts to be the human capacity for free choice is—as a reversal of the sole genuine choice of the human creature—exactly the *servum arbitrium*.<sup>407</sup> In his writing Luther also wanted to assert that the will has the fundamental character of being “engaged” either by God or by evil. But against the concept of free will in Erasmus he understood the will occupied by sin to be solely *servum arbitrium*.<sup>408</sup> Moreover, he understood himself to be compelled to accede human persons’ freedom of the will in the general, natural realm, as was asserted by Erasmus.<sup>409</sup>

In the first instance, Barth eliminates this particular ambiguity of Luther’s teaching on the bound will because Barth does not accept Erasmus’ definition of free will, as Luther apparently did.<sup>410</sup> In Barth’s view, human free will can only be asserted on the basis of the free man Jesus. This human person lives for us as the crucified one, “and in Him we also live as men of the same free will . . . as free men.”<sup>411</sup> The result of this is that “we are not free apart from Him.”<sup>412</sup> In this sense, a statement about the bondage of the will is “a statement of faith” and as such, “it has nothing whatsoever to do with the battle between determinism and indeterminism.”<sup>413</sup>

But this statement of faith does not assert that the sinner “has no will at all,”<sup>414</sup> since humans are created by God as those who will, and sinners will as well.<sup>415</sup> But humans do “not yet or any longer will genuinely and properly.”<sup>416</sup> Insofar as they exist in their being as sinners, they will in a distorted

<sup>407</sup> Erasmus defined it: “*Porro lib. arbi. hoc loco sentimus vim humanae voluntatis, qua se possit homo applicare ad ea, quae perducunt ad aeternam salutem, aut ab iisdem avertere*” (Leitzmann and Clemen, eds., *Luthers Werke in Auswahl* III, p. 151, §§9–12).

<sup>408</sup> On this cf. H. J. Iwand, “Studien zum Problem des unfreien Willens,” in *Um den rechten Glauben. Gesammelte Aufsätze*, ed. K. G. Steck (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1959), p. 55; and in the same volume Iwand’s “Die Freiheit des Christen und die Unfreiheit des Willens,” pp. 256–57. See also G. Ebeling, *Luther. An Introduction to His Thought*, trans. R. A. Wilson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970), p. 210ff.

<sup>409</sup> Cf. Leitzmann and Clemen, eds., *Luthers Werke in Auswahl* III, p. 128, §§40–129,5.

<sup>410</sup> It is not possible to verify this claim with an analysis of Luther’s writings here, nor should my readers anticipate further historical investigation into Luther’s teaching in what follows. However, understanding Luther’s writings is made easier if—as Barth did—one first attempts criticism of Erasmus oneself. Then the strengths and weaknesses of Luther’s writing are able to come to light more clearly.

<sup>411</sup> *CD* IV/2, p. 493.

<sup>412</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>413</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 494.

<sup>414</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>415</sup> Cf. *CD* III/2, p. 406.

<sup>416</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 414.

manner. And so their creatureliness is not a reserve of genuine freedom. Humans are distorted as whole persons, and each of their *arbitrium* are *totum servum arbitrium*. Between this bondage and the freedom regained in Christ there is “no *tertium*, no bridge,”<sup>417</sup> not even a neutral “capacity to choose” which would procure for them a *potentia obediens* in relation to God. They can only will in a distorted manner because as those completely bound in sin they pervert the “capacity” to live the freedom of obedience.

It is exactly this that never becomes clear in H. Küng’s work. Küng interprets the Tridentine doctrine of *liberum arbitrium* to assert that humans possess a “capacity to choose” that can become either a sinful *servum arbitrium* or a pardoned *liberum arbitrium*. Of course, it is questionable whether Trent intended to understand the freedom of the will merely as the human capacity to choose, saying nothing at all about freedom and bondage.<sup>418</sup> If the *liberum arbitrium* of the sinner is explained by the words “*attenuatum et inclinatum*,”<sup>419</sup> then it is understood rather clearly as a (weakened) capacity of the sinner to choose God. Only so does the rejection of Luther’s teaching of the bondage of the will make sense.<sup>420</sup> For Luther’s view understood humans as *passive* as regards grace but did not in any way dispute creaturely free will beyond this. Trent’s *anathema* upon the view that all works of the sinner done before justification are sins—particularly if they relate to justification—only makes sense in this way.<sup>421</sup>

Küng would like to walk a middle road between the intention of Trent—to grant to sinners their own capacity to accept grace—and Barth’s view of bound will. He abstracts a fully neutral capacity to choose, one that really does remain preserved in sinners, even if weakened (!).<sup>422</sup> When *sinners* use this capacity to choose, it becomes the *servum arbitrium*. When *believers* use it, it becomes a *liberum arbitrium*.

According to Barth, however, the “capacity to choose” can only be the good capacity to choose as determined by God for the exercise of the freedom of obedience. This capacity to choose is not weakened, but rather is totally perverted when the sinner uses it. Küng did not work through this, however; neither, surely, did he want to.

<sup>417</sup> CD IV/2, p. 497.

<sup>418</sup> On this cf. H. Diem, “Eine kontroverstheologische Bestandsaufnahme,” in *Hören und Handeln. Festschrift für E. Wolf zum 60. Geburtstag* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1962), p. 72ff; and H. Küng, *Justification. The Doctrine of Karl Barth and a Catholic Reflection*, trans. T. Collins, E. E. Tolk, and D. Granskou (London: Nelson & Sons, 1964), pp. 180–85.

<sup>419</sup> Denzinger and Schönmetzger, eds., *Enchiridion Symbolorum* §1521 (p. 369).

<sup>420</sup> Ibid. §1555 (p. 378).

<sup>421</sup> Ibid. §1557 (p. 378).

<sup>422</sup> H. Küng, *Justification*, pp. 180–81.

When humans pervert their God-given being, they also pervert the gracious determination that this being should come to an end; they hand it over to nothingness. For this reason, the power of death alienated from God does not consist in the fact that it ends human life, but rather in that it ends it *wrongly*. Sinners rush headlong toward this false future of their being.<sup>423</sup> Hence, Barth calls sin a “mortal sickness.”<sup>424</sup> That is to say, sin is actually a human act which adds the *foreign* determination of nihilating death to human existence. But humans are not *yet* dead.<sup>425</sup> Death, for them, has not yet become ontologically constitutive. They only live as those “slipping” into death.<sup>426</sup> They live out the annihilation into which nothingness delivers them.

Of course, in God’s grace, the limits of human existence—an existence which has been aggravated by the law of sin to such an extent that death becomes inescapable (Rom. 7:7ff.)—are preserved. Nevertheless, human pride and sloth compel people to attempt to withdraw from God. Under this compulsion of sin’s history they repeatedly renew the cycle of sinfulness.

For Barth, this is the point at which to discuss the *peccata actualia*. They are enacted by sinners in connection with this history of corruption and so can in no way be abstracted from the distortion of human being in its entirety. Men and women live out the distortion of their being in “individual decisions,”<sup>427</sup> because there is no situation in their lives in which they can suppress having to live out their being toward death. According to Barth it is this that characterizes their being as a being *in the flesh*.<sup>428</sup>

#### EXCURSUS: SIN AND EVIL

Barth considers evil (*das Übel*) to be that form of nothingness human beings have to *suffer* as a consequence of their sin. It is nothingness manifest

<sup>423</sup> Cf. CD IV/2, p. 487.

<sup>424</sup> Ibid., p. 486.

<sup>425</sup> Cf. CD IV/2, pp. 486–87. According to Kierkegaard, our sickness unto death consists of the “hopelessness of not even being able to die” (*The Sickness Unto Death*, trans. H. V. Hong and E. H. Hong [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980], p. 18). To this extent, for the person in despair death is a kind of release. Yet, according to Barth, despairing sinners delude themselves if they set their hope on death since nothingness reigns in the death of the sinner.

<sup>426</sup> CD IV/2, p. 489.

<sup>427</sup> Ibid., p. 491.

<sup>428</sup> Hence Barth’s description of human misery aims to be an interpretation of the Pauline understanding of human “existence in the flesh.” The twofold use of the concept “flesh” indicates the contradiction of the human in sin (cf. CD IV/2, p. 489). The person who is created as a human person “in the flesh” enters into a “disqualified below” when living out existence in the flesh (ibid.). Unfortunately, in his exegesis of Paul, Barth did not make use of the distinction between being “in the flesh” and walking “according to the flesh.” Had he done so, he would have been able to indicate more clearly to what degree the human “in the flesh” is also a sinner when walking “according to the flesh.”

“physically.”<sup>429</sup> Barth adjudges this physical manifestation of nothingness to be “an element and sign of God’s righteous wrath and judgment” in human life.<sup>430</sup> On the basis of this presupposition, sickness, for example, is “an element in the rebellion of chaos against God’s creation.”<sup>431</sup>

The problem of evil is certainly complicated by the fact that, in Barth’s view, natural human being is a properly finite mode of being whose end is understood to be dissolution. At this point, Schleiermacher distinguished “natural evils” that are independent of human activity from the “social evils” that are brought about by human activity. Only social evils are rooted in sin and are to be regarded as God’s punishment for sin. Natural evils, on the other hand, can only subjectively be understood as punishment since human beings would not experience them at all apart from sin.<sup>432</sup>

Barth also assesses evil—albeit quite differently from Schleiermacher—from various perspectives. Seen from the point of view of sin, evil is to be ascribed to the guilt of human sin. From the point of view of God’s gracious disposing, “the divine benevolence” can also be reflected in evil.<sup>433</sup> Evil would then be “not only the forerunner and messenger of death and judgment, but also, concealed under this form, the witness to God’s creative goodness, the forerunner and messenger of the eternal life.”<sup>434</sup>

The church’s doctrine of original sin asserts not only the sin’s total grasp upon human existence, but also its *universality*.<sup>435</sup> Yet, according to Barth, this assertion may not be grounded in the “creaturely mechanics” of the transmission of Adam’s sin to all human beings through the act of procreation. Since such a move threatens to relieve individuals of their guilt, even Schleiermacher wanted to see so-called “original sin” understood as a common act and common guilt of the human race.<sup>436</sup> Ritschl elaborated this doctrine of the common sin of the human race into the “kingdom of sin.”<sup>437</sup> In this account, sin as it were propagates itself in all people by way of evil examples.<sup>438</sup> But on these views, recourse to the pragmatics of propagation is

<sup>429</sup> CD III/3, p. 310.

<sup>430</sup> CD III/4, p. 366.

<sup>431</sup> Ibid.

<sup>432</sup> Cf. Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, §§75–76, p. 315ff.

<sup>433</sup> CD III/4, p. 374.

<sup>434</sup> Ibid., p. 373.

<sup>435</sup> “All men [and women] who are born according to the course of nature are conceived and born in sin” (*Augsburg Confession* II, Leitzmann et al., eds., *Die Bekenntnisschriften*, p. 53).

<sup>436</sup> Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, §71, pp. 285–86.

<sup>437</sup> A. Ritschl, *The Christian Doctrine of Justification and Reconciliation*, p. 340ff.

<sup>438</sup> See A. Ritschl, “Instruction in the Christian Religion,” in *Three Essays*, trans. P. Hefner (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972), p. 233.

merely replaced by another pragmatism. As Barth sees it, the fact that sin is the sin of *all* human beings is not an observation one can make from the phenomenon of "humanity." It is only on the basis of God's judgment that the universality of sin can be asserted with theological justification.

Barth proceeds on the basis of Romans 11:32. Accordingly there are two great human "unities." The one, directed toward the future, is that of divine *mercy*. The other, directed toward the past, is that of divine *concluding*.<sup>439</sup> Both unities are related to one another by God's judgment, for in Jesus Christ the first unity has become the human future just as the second has been made past. Therefore, it is true that those who have their future in the realm of divine mercy have their past in the realm of divine concluding.

The concepts of "unity" or "sphere" in Barth communicate the fact that God concluded *humanity*<sup>440</sup> and *world history* under disobedience, in order to have mercy upon them.<sup>441</sup> By "humanity" here Barth understands the interrelation of all individual human persons in their respective responsibility; by "history" he intends the enactment of the existence of this humanity in words and works.<sup>442</sup>

The concepts "humanity" and "history" are in this sense *theological* concepts. Humans are created by God in relationship to other humans; consequently, humanity cannot mean anything other than the event of the relation of persons to one another, insofar as they are judged by God to be a unity. Only in this event does humanity exist. But, as a result, the concepts "humanity" and "world history" belong inseparably together. The being of humanity is constituted through historicity.

This humanity is judged by God to be sinful humanity *because* all humans have sinned (Rom. 5:12). The "sphere of darkness" into which God concluded sinful humanity is the sphere of the enactment of a history in which everyone sins. To this extent, this realm is actualized ever anew, and so Barth cannot understand it mythically in the sense of a gnostic *Aeon*. Barth goes on to say that the Bible gives to world history "and to all men in this sense the general title of Adam."<sup>443</sup> "The name of Adam sums up this history . . . It sums up the meaning or meaninglessness of this history."<sup>444</sup>

According to Barth, "Adam" is the *original human being*. Such a designation can be misunderstood. The idea of the specifically ahistorical form of

<sup>439</sup> Cf. CD IV/1, p. 501.

<sup>440</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 504–5.

<sup>441</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 505–6.

<sup>442</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 504, 505.

<sup>443</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 507.

<sup>444</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 508.

late Judaic and gnostic Adam-anthropological speculation is at once bound up with it. Yet, according to Barth, Adam is a historical human person like all others. The Bible of course depicts this history in the form of a saga.<sup>445</sup> Nevertheless, "Adam" is not a title to "disguise . . . an unhistorical and timeless reality."<sup>446</sup> When the Old Testament puts the history of Adam at the head of all its histories, it intends to say that world history began with Adam's sin. It did not begin with an idea of the sinful human person, but rather with a sinful human person himself. "There never was a golden age"; Adam "was immediately the first sinner."<sup>447</sup> "He was in a trivial form what we all are, a man of sin. But he was so as the beginner, and therefore as *primus inter pares*."<sup>448</sup>

Correspondingly, Adam is "not a fate which God has suspended over us," but he is "the truth concerning us as it is known to God and told to us."<sup>449</sup> We are recognized to be "in Adam" by God. Because all humans sin *like Adam*, "it is the Word of God which gives this name and title to mankind and the history of man. It is God's Word which fuses all men into unity with this man as the *primus inter pares*."<sup>450</sup> Thus are they concluded in disobedience.

<sup>445</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 508.

<sup>446</sup> *CD* III/1, p. 80.

<sup>447</sup> *CD* IV/1, p. 508.

<sup>448</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 509.

<sup>449</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 511.

<sup>450</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 511. Theologically, Barth attempted to base this interpretation of the interrelation of Adam and the rest of humanity in continuity of sin upon an interpretation of Rom. 5:12-21 (cf. in particular, K. Barth, *Christ and Adam. Man and Humanity in Romans 5*, trans. T. A. Smail (New York: Harper & Bros., 1956). We cannot enter into the debate surrounding this interpretation here—but see R. Bultmann, "Adam and Christ According to Romans 5," in *Current Issues in New Testament Interpretation*, ed. W. Klassen and S. F. Snyder (London: SCM Press, 1962), pp. 143-44; E. Brandenburger, *Adam und Christus, Exegetisch-religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung zu Röm 5,12-21 [1 Kor 15]* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1962), p. 271ff.; E. Jüngel, "Das Gesetz zwischen Adam und Christus. Eine theologische Studie zu Rm 5,12-21," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 60 (1963), p. 42ff. Let us only say this much: Barth's main thesis (that we have to understand Adam from Christ [Barth, *Christ and Adam*, pp. 86-87]) makes it possible for him to understand Adam historically and not mythologically. In this he carries out in his own way the twofold breakthrough of myth that Paul himself had achieved by his correction of the corresponding Gnostic idea (cf. Jüngel, "Das Gesetz zwischen Adam und Christus," p. 56). But Barth provides no account of the process of breaking through the myth, and from the outset he understands the idea of correspondence to be the corrected idea. As such, he interprets it in keeping with his understanding of the *analogia fidei*. On this understanding, Adam can be the *primus inter pares*. Thus, while Paul desires to indicate how the new asserts itself against the old and why the new remains reliant upon the old (cf. *ibid.*, p. 63), Barth brings to bear the ontological consequences of his understanding of the *analogia fidei*. The exegetical shortcomings of this move is evident. Nevertheless, Barth does advantageously set out the Tendenz of the text, and to this extent took into account Bultmann's demand for "material criticism" (cf. Bultmann, "Karl Barth, *Resurrection of the Dead*," in *Faith and Understanding*, pp. 67, 86).

## SUMMARY

In his doctrine of sin, Barth deals with all the problems of church tradition concerning the theme of "sin" and resolves them in a new way. What makes this resolution possible without downplaying the significance of sin for God and humans is Barth's theological grounding of every individual statement in God's judgment.

The most important observation upon the nature of sin remains that sin is always at work to "play itself down." It is exactly in this way that the power of nothingness to draw humans into corruption works itself out, all the while concealing this corruption. That sin disappears from both consciousness and the living reality of reflective men and women—something we can readily observe—is itself an act of nothingness. And this makes it more and more impossible for any perspective that views the world's reality purely through observation to distinguish between human persons and their sin. Human sin offers no surface for people to grab onto. On the contrary, it solicits their agreement and has indeed already secured it.

God's judgment, by contrast, consists in *differentiating* between nothingness and sin, between sinners and their sin. Humans live from this differentiation. That they sin nonetheless makes them inexcusable before God. Sinners want to flee the situation of being inexcusable. But God allows them to live on; thus, simply by living, sinners remain imprisoned by their inexcusability. They live in concealed and open misuse of their creatureliness. They do so first in relation to God, and this is their fall. They do so further in relation to fellow human beings and to themselves, and this constitutes their misery.

Human persons, fallen and miserable on account of their sin, no longer have any possibility of freeing themselves from sin. For sinners exist *only* according to the flesh; their willing and choosing is determined *entirely* by the sinner. Hence, their acting is *only* an enactment of sin and their future is *only* death. And so, apart from God's grace, they can *only* be lost to nothingness.



## V

### The Overcoming of Sin

Barth's doctrine of sin is a doctrine of sin overcome in the death of Jesus Christ. The sinful human person of whom the doctrine sin treats no longer exists. Inasmuch as this is so, the doctrine of sin should be finished after it has dealt with this old corrupted human being. But in truth, it is in no way finished. For sinners *continue* to live out their sin even after it has been overcome by Jesus Christ. The reason for this must now be ascertained.

Barth does not answer this question exclusively and primarily within the doctrine of justification as the Lutheran tradition suggests.<sup>451</sup> In his view the "ground" and "pinnacle" of the doctrine of justification is christology.<sup>452</sup> And christology shows the justification of humans to be primarily an act of *God's self-abasement*, to which the *exaltation* of humans in salvation inseparably belongs.<sup>453</sup> Hence, the fact that the sinner may still exist even after sin has been overcome cannot be established in an isolated process of "appropriating salvation," but solely in the history of Jesus Christ himself. It is from this history, as Barth sees it, that particular consequences can be drawn out for the doctrines of justification and sanctification respectively.

#### THE SIGNIFICANCE OF JESUS CHRIST'S DEATH AND RESURRECTION FOR THE SINNER

In the death of Jesus Christ, God, in place of the sinner, directly confronted "the power of that which is not."<sup>454</sup> This confrontation brought God himself

<sup>451</sup> Cf. E. Wolf, *Die Rechtfertigungslehre als Mitte und Grenze reformatischer Theologie, Peregrinatio*, Band 2 (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1965), p. 11ff.

<sup>452</sup> Cf. CD IV/1, p. 527.

<sup>453</sup> Cf. CD IV/2, pp. 505–6.

<sup>454</sup> CD IV/1, p. 247.

into the nihilation of nothingness. For the Son of God died. But God *could* endure death as death in himself. Even more: by giving himself over to death God identified his divine will with the willing of nothingness. "God's will was done as the will of Satan was done"<sup>455</sup>—admittedly to the ruin of Satan. Of course nothingness wants to rise up against God—but not in this way. God himself had determined the battlefield. And before nothingness could pull God into nihilation, God took this possibility away from it and took himself into nihilation. The power of death was thereby taken away precisely in death—and thus in its ownmost act. Because God addresses to himself the "No" to which nothingness owes itself, the possibility of speaking this "No" is taken away from nothingness.<sup>456</sup> And humans can *live* where nothingness has its power of negation withdrawn from it. God brought human beings as sinners (as well as their sin) to an end in the death of Jesus Christ and so God created space for the being and existence of a new human creature in a fulfilled covenant with God.<sup>457</sup>

The reconciliation of humans to God is to this extent in fact *completed* in the death of Jesus Christ.<sup>458</sup> The resurrection of Jesus Christ makes this completed act of God powerfully effective for us.<sup>459</sup> Contrary to other remarks Barth makes,<sup>460</sup> the resurrection is more than merely the noetic flip-side of the same event.<sup>461</sup> It is precisely by the power of the resurrection that a new sphere in which for us to exist is created in the death of Jesus Christ.

This sphere is, first, *a temporal sphere* in the midst of the world. In reconciliation God grants this sphere of time to men and women because he does not want to cease to make history with them. God grants it as the *time of the community* in the world spanning from the time of his revelation in Jesus Christ to the time of his coming again in Jesus Christ.<sup>462</sup> Hence, God's reconciling grace is differentiated within itself according to the particular times of its advent to humans. After the overcoming sin, the *parousia* of Jesus Christ<sup>463</sup> has a form which graciously takes account of the worldly relationships in which human beings live.

<sup>455</sup> Ibid., p. 268.

<sup>456</sup> For a thorough discussion with the *problematic* of talk of the "death of God" and the distinction of such talk from other popular contemporary forms of it, see E. Jüngel, "Der Tod des lebenden Gottes. Ein Plakat," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 65 (1968), p. 93ff.

<sup>457</sup> Cf. CD IV/1, p. 254.

<sup>458</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 254–55.

<sup>459</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 305.

<sup>460</sup> Cf. CD IV/2, p. 116ff.

<sup>461</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 304.

<sup>462</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 319.

<sup>463</sup> For criticism of Barth's concept of *parousia*, see G. Gloege, "Zur Versöhnungslehre Karl Barths, KD IV/3," *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 85 (1960), p. 161ff. Cf. also below p. 97.

In overcoming sin God aims at humans as *free subjects*. For this reason the sphere of existence [*Daseinsraum*] granted to these free subjects is not a blessing which is, so to speak, "lop-sided-favour."<sup>464</sup> Rather, it once again affords human beings time and opportunity for the knowledge, the confession, and the praise of God. Along with this, time also remains burdened by human sin. Therefore, God's grace wills that it succeed against sin's burden not only on the cross, but also in every single human person so as to *make human beings partners* in overcoming sin. Accordingly, the fact that people are *still* sinners does not mean "that their present being in and with Him is in any way minimised, but that it is augmented."<sup>465</sup> For they are permitted to be partakers of God's grace as men and women of the world.

The time granted to humans by God even after the overcoming of sin is not unlimited. The return of Jesus Christ unites all forms of his coming in the fulfillment of this advent. Hence the time of the community in the world is not exclusively a time determined by the time of the world since its origin and future is the coming of Jesus Christ; to this extent it is also an *eschatological* time, though still a time of sin. The time of the "not-yet" lives from the surplus of this "already." Thus, the determining ground of this present time is not the continued existence of the sinner as such, but rather God's way with the sinner.

The significance of sin for human beings in this time can now be explained through purposeful analyses of Barth's doctrines of justification and sanctification as well as his doctrines of human falsehood and condemnation.

#### THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SINNER'S JUSTIFICATION FOR THE SINNER

According to Barth, human participation in God's grace in time takes place first of all in the justification of the sinner. At this point we must forgo a comprehensive presentation of the *problematic* of justification. For our purposes, both the exegetical dispute over the meaning of the Pauline concept of *righteousness of God* as well as the historic dogmatic and confessional consequences of this understanding can only serve as a corrective to the Barthian view.

Barth sketched out his doctrine of justification entirely on the basis of God's "right which is superior, absolutely superior to the wrong of which man is guilty."<sup>466</sup> In so doing, he appears to stand close to the exegesis that understands the *righteousness of God* in Paul primarily as a *characteristic* of God that

<sup>464</sup> CD IV/3, p. 333.

<sup>465</sup> CD IV/1, p. 328.

<sup>466</sup> Ibid., p. 529.

creatively asserts itself in the world in definite ways.<sup>467</sup> But what is decisive is *how* God's righteousness asserts itself in the world and how it makes the sinner into someone justified.

Here again, Barth can only be understood on the basis of his doctrine of election. For God's righteousness—God's "right" or "justice"—is the event of God's concurrence with himself in Jesus Christ.<sup>468</sup> Where God's justice is an event, God himself eventuates, because God justifies himself. But in Jesus Christ, God does not want to be just apart from human beings. Hence in his election God determines his self-justification to be an event of his grace for human creatures. And God puts his justice into action on behalf of these creatures by dying in Jesus Christ on the cross for sinners. Thus, God *is* only just himself *in that* he justifies sinners. This corresponds rather more to an exegesis of Paul that understands by the *righteousness of God* in Paul a *relationship* effected by God between God and human.<sup>469</sup> According to this exegesis, it is in the event of God's righteousness that human beings are just *extra se*. They receive this righteousness in faith (Rom. 3:21ff.) and can do nothing in faith to acquire it (Rom. 4:5).

However, Barth did not assign any fundamental theological significance to justifying faith. Conscious of its "objective content"—the event of justification outside ourselves in Jesus Christ—Barth plays down justification by faith alone as the "subjective side" of justification.<sup>470</sup> In this way, faith appears to him to become (at least in the doctrine of justification) a primarily anthropological, un-eschatological phenomenon.<sup>471</sup> But according to Pauline understanding, faith must certainly not be separated from a people's modes of conduct, though it must still be clearly distinguished from them. Faith is a gift that God's Word brings with itself (Gal. 3:25); it is a gift that *comes* to human beings. It only belongs to humans inasmuch as God grants it to them. But if this is so, then it cannot only be the "subjective side" of justification left to the human being. It breaks out of the schema of subject and object because it is the ground of the relationship of God and humans created by God himself. Hence, the justification of sinners in Jesus Christ and the provision of

<sup>467</sup> As had already been argued by A. Schlatter, *Gottes Gerechtigkeit. Ein Kommentar zum Römerbrief*, 3rd ed. (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1959), pp. 36, 38; E. Käsemann, "Gottesgerechtigkeit bei Paulus," in his *Exegetische Versuche und Besinnung*, Band 2 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1964), p. 181ff.; P. Stuhlmacher, *Gerechtigkeit Gottes bei Paulus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1965), passim.

<sup>468</sup> Cf. CD IV/1, p. 561.

<sup>469</sup> Cf., for example, E. Jüngel, *Paulus und Jesus. Eine Untersuchung zur Präzisierung der Frage nach dem Ursprung der Christologie* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1962), p. 44.

<sup>470</sup> Cf. CD IV/1, p. 615.

<sup>471</sup> Cf., in contrast, CD I/1, p. 235.

the gift of faith belong together. People who are justified in Jesus Christ (in the time of this world) can only be those who have faith.<sup>472</sup> Yet, given this presupposition, faith is primarily an eschatological phenomenon that determines human beings *extra se* always anew.

Because Barth does not want to say this,<sup>473</sup> his doctrine of justification falls into a certain obscurity, particularly in its understanding the existence of justified sinners. For, on the one hand, Barth wants to understand human righteousness as an *alien* righteousness acquired in Jesus Christ. On the other hand, given his understanding of faith, he must also describe the *being* of justified persons as a human way of acting that only becomes genuinely thematic in the doctrine of sanctification. For this reason, Barth's understanding of the being of justified persons needs to be made more precise, and this on the basis of his christological approach to the doctrine of justification.

According to Barth, the event of justification means two things for sinners: first, being adjudged to be sinners; and second, receiving a part in God's righteousness and becoming new human beings. Yet humans are judged and made righteous in Jesus Christ *outside* themselves. Only in him is their new being a *complete* and perfected being. The latter must be worked out with greater clarity in distinction *from* Barth before one considers *with* Barth the form in which God assigns this being to men and women who still exist as sinners. And this for the reasons that follow.

The statement that humans are judged and justified in Jesus Christ occasioned Barth to describe the being of those who are justified as a being *in transition* from the death to the resurrection of Jesus Christ.<sup>474</sup> The death of Jesus Christ is the *terminus a quo* at which justification begins. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the *terminus ad quem* by which it is fulfilled.<sup>475</sup> Justified persons are *en route between the terminus a quo and terminus ad quem*. But this "between" is neither a stretch of land nor a span of time like that which lay between the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This "between" is the *event* in which women and men who still exist *totally* as sinners are already *totally* justified.

<sup>472</sup> Therefore, see E. Jüngel's proposal to speak of God's being already within the doctrine of the election of believers (Jüngel, *Paulus und Jesus*, p. 95).

<sup>473</sup> Barth does not want to speak of faith as of an eschatological decision, so as not to permit the "history of Jesus Christ" to coincide "with the history of the believer" (CD IV/1, p. 767, against R. Bultmann). On the other hand, however, he clearly opposed the Tridentine view which divides the event of salvation into "objective" and "subjective" events of salvation (cf. CD IV/1, p. 84ff.). Yet, in the course of the positive development of a concept of faith, such criticism of Trent did not get played out, which is why it was also marginalized by H. Küng (cf. *Justification*, p. 223ff.).

<sup>474</sup> Cf. CD IV/1, pp. 544, 587.

<sup>475</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 557.

This interpretation of the *simul iustus et peccator* is problematic however.<sup>476</sup> For on the basis of revelation, we can only attest that the human *is* a *peccator* because of the fact of human existence as *peccator*. And so it cannot ever belong ontologically to human being. Yet it *must* be so if the new being of the human person is understood directly from the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as a being in transition. For this reason, Barth's interpretation of *simul iustus et peccator* is open to being misunderstood to claim that in Jesus Christ not only "being righteous" but also "being a sinner" inheres in human persons such that they can be *en route* from one to the other. In order to avoid this misunderstanding, Barth must describe the *being* of justified persons as their *existence* even though this is not at all his intention.<sup>477</sup>

These difficulties—which burden not only Barth's doctrine of justification<sup>478</sup>—can be avoided if we clearly distinguish the new human being fulfilled *extra se* from the form in which this new being is assigned to sinners. Again, this demands a more precise distinction between the *being* and the *existence* of believers. The new human being is completed in Jesus Christ. But because in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ God mercifully affords time to men and women who still exist as sinners, God *transitionally* assigns to them the being of Jesus Christ as *transitional* being from the state of being a sinner to that of being righteous. The mode of this assignation is the *faith* that God's Word brings with it to humans. Faith in turn brings the *existence* of men and women into correspondence with their "transitional being" such that being a sinner is made past for them, while being righteous becomes the presence of a determining future. Faith turns humans away from their existence in sin and orients them to that new being which has already been accomplished. Thus, as Barth himself emphasizes, no balance is established between being a sinner and being righteous.<sup>479</sup> When humans live out their transitional being through faith, they are certainly still *totally* sinners yet already *totally* justified. But in this, through faith, God's Word desires to effect a state of being justified *in toto against* that of being a sinner *in toto*. Yet at the return of Jesus Christ, the *existence* of women and men justified before God will be complete,

<sup>476</sup> A comparison with Luther's understanding of the *simul iustus et peccator* would be rewarding but at this point would lead too far into problems concerning the interpretation of Luther. On the problem see W. Joest, "Paulus und das lutherische *Simul iustus et peccator*," pp. 270–321; and also his *Gesetz und Freiheit. Das Problem des Tertius usus legis bei Luther und die neutestamentliche Parainese*, 3rd ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1961).

<sup>477</sup> Cf. CD IV/1, p. 554: Being in transition is not an "immanent determination" of human existence!

<sup>478</sup> They extend into his doctrine of sanctification and later into the doctrine of baptism (CD IV/4).

<sup>479</sup> Cf. CD II/1, pp. 627–28.

even as their *being* has already been made complete in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Given this revision of Barth's view of the being of justified human persons, the actual *conversion* of men and women becomes an unequivocal theme of the doctrine of sanctification without such conversion being left to human initiative.<sup>480</sup>

### THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE HUMAN IN SANCTIFICATION

As justification is primarily the work of God who abases himself for our sake, so too is sanctification primarily the work of the Son of Man exalted for our sake. Hence sanctification, like justification, is a work of God for us in Jesus Christ; correspondingly, in material connection with the former, it too belongs to the history of Jesus Christ.

In sanctification God creates a "new form of existence for man in which he can live as the loyal covenant partner of God."<sup>481</sup> The direction of the Son through the Holy Spirit to those who have received God's justifying judgment produces this *Existenzform*. Yet this is to say that this form of existence is *given* to human beings. It does not first come about by virtue of their existence itself. It already exists in the existence of the man Jesus.

To this extent Barth—in precise analogy to the doctrine of justification—from the outset aligns the sanctified being of human persons with the enactment of their existence. If men and women have their sanctified being *extra se*, then sanctification cannot be a deification of human persons which would enable them to become holy (in a quantitative sense). Rather, it brings human beings into a worldly, human correspondence to that sanctified being acquired *extra hominum*. So, in Barth's view, the issue in sanctification is not only that the existence of men and women is fulfilled in correspondence to their being as those who are justified; the new being given to human beings has a two-fold aspect: it is a justified and a sanctified being. Moving from our interpretation of Barth's doctrine of justification, this entails the following consequences.

If the new being afforded humans is constituted as *a whole* by justification, then the significance of the sanctification of the being of the new human for

<sup>480</sup> Hence everything depends upon the distinction between *iustitia efficax* and *iustitia imputativa* already being surmounted by God, and not having to be surmounted by the human person who is being sanctified.

<sup>481</sup> CD IV/2, p. 514.

concrete human existence is made more precise. While in justification concrete human existence is affected by the fact *that* it receives a new being, in sanctification it is affected *because* it has received a new being. For this reason, the new being of the human is constituted in justification through historicity. In sanctification, humans are introduced into the history which corresponds to their being. Yet this introduction happens in such a way that the new being already implies and brings with it the new form of existence. The indicative of the new being—the judgment of the Father—simultaneously brings into force the imperative of the Christian existence—the direction of the Son.

Barth did not define the relationship of justification and sanctification in this way quite so explicitly.<sup>482</sup> He described sanctification simply as the movement of the life of Christians grounded in the holiness of Jesus Christ. For this reason, just how it is that the movement into which human beings are brought by *faith* is to be distinguished from the movement of human beings in *love* has to remain unclear.<sup>483</sup> Yet clarity at this point could serve to emphasize the distinction between the *being* and the *existence* of justified and sanctified persons.

Because the justified person is simultaneously sanctified, justification at the same time means the real transformation of the concrete situation of human life. The direction of the Son strengthens the reality of the existence of sanctified persons as an “axis,” as it were, in the life of sinners.<sup>484</sup> This axis makes their lives into lives in *conversion*. Men and women leave their old way and enter a new way.<sup>485</sup> But such a conversion is not dependent primarily on our “little conversion.”<sup>486</sup> For if this were the case the *totum-totum* of the doctrine of justification would, within the doctrine of salvation, be transformed into a *partim-partim*. On the contrary, under the direction of the Son even the “*vita christiana* in conversion” is “the history, in which at one and the same time man is still wholly the old man and already wholly the new.”<sup>487</sup>

<sup>482</sup> But see the initial moves toward our interpretation in Barth's essay, “Rechtfertigung und Heiligung,” *Zwischen den Zeiten* 5 (1927), p. 281ff. In this text, the premises of the “dialectical” method would admittedly need to be corrected by Barth's doctrine of analogy.

<sup>483</sup> In connection with Barth's understanding of faith, Küng rightly asks why it is that one never speaks of justification by love (*Justification*, pp. 256–57). In my view, the reason for this in Barth's work is that one can simply transpose large portions of his doctrine of justification into the doctrine of sanctification (and vice versa) without altering the sense of any of the particular statements (cf. *CD IV/1*, pp. 563–77, 591–96; and *CD IV/2*, pp. 570–74).

<sup>484</sup> Cf. *CD IV/2*, p. 561.

<sup>485</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 570.

<sup>486</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 582. It is characteristic that Barth parallels “little conversion” with “little faith” (*CD IV/1*, p. 741).

<sup>487</sup> *CD IV/2*, p. 572.

## THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE DOCTRINES OF JUSTIFICATION AND SANCTIFICATION FOR BARTH'S DOCTRINE OF SIN

Barth's doctrine of justification and doctrine of sanctification are respectively developed in accordance with his doctrine of sin.<sup>488</sup> In them is shown how sin becomes a vanquished reality for human beings. Yet at the same time this reality also becomes thematic in a *new way*, for humans continue to exist as sinners. So on one hand, what has to be pinpointed is just how this ongoing existence of sinners stands in relation to the way by which God graciously grants men and women their new existence. On the other hand, the misunderstanding that through such a relation sin would win a right to exist for human beings has to be checked.

Even so, the question concerning the concrete significance of such sin for justified human persons remains unanswered. Can sin still affect the death of *believers*, for whom it has been overcome in its legal and nonlegal form? Isn't such sin insignificant now when viewed from the point of view of human beings? To this we may offer a sixfold answer. First, Barth's doctrine of sin as such is sketched out on the basis of the overcoming of sin in the death of Jesus Christ. And yet it does not compel such conclusions. Second, even if they live in time after the event of the overcoming of sin, sinners *remain* old human beings, because justification and sanctification have occurred outside of them, because they cannot free themselves from their sins, and further because justification and sanctification do not abolish their existence as sinners in such a way that certain inner qualities of grace are assigned to them in these events. Third, believers *need not* exist as sinners and yet they *actually* do so exist. Fourth, in justification and sanctification, God proceeds *against* sin so as to include human beings in this process. For this reason, sin is a matter of the highest significance for believers. Fifth, we may even conclude that the sin of believers *intensifies* the significance of sin because it is leveled directly against God's manifest grace. Finally, sixth, this intensification does not find expression in Barth's doctrine of justification and sanctification. Discussion of this only takes place in the third part of the doctrine of reconciliation. Materially, however, the form of sin presented there belongs in the present thematic context.

### HUMAN FALSEHOOD

Through the *true word* of the prophecy of Jesus Christ,<sup>489</sup> sinners become believers—that is, human persons justified and sanctified by God. Insofar as

<sup>488</sup> Cf. CD IV/1, p. 514ff., and CD IV/2, p. 499ff.

<sup>489</sup> Cf. above p. 59.

this word effectively pertains to the existence of sinners by the granting of a new being, there takes place an historical "encounter with the *Word* of divine grace" and these men and women.<sup>490</sup> Human pride and sloth constitute a kind of corporate exponent against this word.<sup>491</sup> They *themselves* take shape as *a word* in this clash. In Barth's view, this word of sinners leveled against the truth of grace is human *falsehood*.<sup>492</sup>

Barth does not depict human falsehood in the same tightly systemic fashion in which he does pride and sloth. In the first instance, he describes the nature of falsehood by the measure of its contradiction of the truth revealed in Jesus Christ in general. Next, he indicates in detail how falsehood is a maneuver aimed at avoiding certain elements of this truth. And yet, falsehood does also bear the same characteristics as the other forms of sin. This is to say, first, that it is *futile*, for it cannot invalidate the truth. Hence falsehood does not even try to ignore truth. Rather it evades it by resisting it.<sup>493</sup> In evading resistance to the truth, a liar hears the truth "only as he chooses to do so."<sup>494</sup> Those who lie propagate a falsified truth. But right from the outset this is "unmasked and exposed" in its "impotence" by the Word of truth itself.<sup>495</sup> Moreover, falsehood is nevertheless an actual and *effective* practice of sinners. The falsified truth enjoys success in the world.<sup>496</sup>

In all this, as we have already indicated, falsehood *masks* and *veils* its nature and its intention. "The true and succulent lie always has something of the scent of the truth."<sup>497</sup> But in the light of truth it becomes immediately obvious just what it is that sin *qua* falsehood is evading. It is evading the identity of the truth with the *person* of the true witness.<sup>498</sup> The sinner actually wants to

<sup>490</sup> CD IV/3, p. 373.

<sup>491</sup> Cf. *ibid.*

<sup>492</sup> The confrontation of truth and falsehood is characteristic of the Johannine literature in particular. Barth does not look to a single Johannine text in the context of his doctrine of the lie (but cf. CD IV/3, pp. 260–61). Cf. also R. Bultmann's interpretation of John 8:44: "And just as *aletheia* does not refer to the 'uncoveredness' of all (worldly) existents, but to God's reality, in particular to God's reality as it unveils and reveals itself to man . . . so too *pseudos*, here does not have the formal meaning of the deceptive 'coveredness' of existents or of error in general, but refers to the will which is opposed to God, which indeed creates its deceitful reality only by such opposition; that is to say, it refers to nothingness, which in its revolt claims to be something and whose only being lies in this revolt" (*The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, trans. G. R. Beasley-Murray [Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971], p. 321). Barth wants to say exactly the same thing as well.

<sup>493</sup> Cf. CD IV/3, p. 436.

<sup>494</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>495</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 439.

<sup>496</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 436.

<sup>497</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 438.

<sup>498</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 440ff.

be satisfied with a “neutral truth,” but not with any that “makes an attack on him” in the person of this one human being.<sup>499</sup>

But falsehood is not only seeking to evade this truth. It is also evading the truth of *the suffering* and *the death* of Jesus Christ.<sup>500</sup> It transposes the offensiveness of the cross into any kind of apparent truth. Similarly, it is evading the *Word of God* that confronts and summons the human person. It makes the opposition of God and human beings into something relative.<sup>501</sup> Finally, human falsehood is also evading God’s sovereign *freedom* that liberates men and women for the freedom of the children of God. It perverts the relationship between God and human beings into some sort of “religious” relation.

Therefore, in falsehood, the essential characteristic of sin comes even more clearly to light than in the form of pride and sloth: sin is a futile vanishing. In knowledge of the truth, falsehood works intentionally and “consciously, according to plan,”<sup>502</sup> to make the fact and awareness of sin disappear, and to construct an *ersatz* ideology. To this extent it distinguishes itself from the falsehood latent in every sin. For the nature of nothingness—to appear to be something it is not—is, so to speak, most perfectly realized in this “Christian sin.” According to Barth, the “Christian form of falsehood” is the “primary phenomenon of falsehood.”<sup>503</sup> And, moreover, this means that the consciously anti-Christian versions of falsehood are, for their part, first made possible by “Christian falsehood.”<sup>504</sup>

### THE THREAT OF THE SINNER’S DAMNATION

Falsehood is a particular “provocation of God.”<sup>505</sup> For it attempts to reverse the *divine exchange*, to undo reconciliation once again.<sup>506</sup> As Barth sees it,

<sup>499</sup> Ibid., p. 441.

<sup>500</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 441ff.

<sup>501</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 443ff.

<sup>502</sup> Ibid., p. 451. Thus, there also cannot be a “venial” *peccatum involuntarium* in renatis (on this, see H. Schmid, *The Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans. C. A. Hay and H. E. Jacobs, 3rd ed. [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1961], pp. 253–54, §4. And so there is no sin at all that is “venial” because in Jesus Christ *all sins* are adjudged to be equally worthy of death—and are forgiven as such. For this reason, the older Reformed theologians also rejected the (Lutheran) distinction between *peccata mortalia* and *peccata venalia* (cf. H. Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, trans. G. T. Thomson [London: George Allen & Unwin, 1950], pp. 349–50).

<sup>503</sup> CD IV/3, p. 451. “And the recognition of this primary phenomenon carries with it an insight into the false nature of human unbelief, superstition and error” (Ibid.). For this reason, critical evaluation of religions must also belong to the doctrine of human falsehood (on this cf. CD I/2, p. 297ff.).

<sup>504</sup> To this extent, “Christian falsehood” brings down upon itself not only the judgment of God, but also the dreadful judgment of the world.

<sup>505</sup> CD IV/3, p. 464.

<sup>506</sup> Cf. CD IV/2, p. 21.

such an attempt also draws the believer into "the same situation in which men exist whom Jesus Christ has not yet encountered."<sup>507</sup> Only the falsity of this situation is heightened even more by the knowledge of the sinner.<sup>508</sup> For persons who play false must *suffer* their false situation without center and periphery, without genuine human coexistence, without continuity and genuine language.<sup>509</sup> Just so, they now become acquainted with the condemnation of human existence set forth for them in Jesus Christ. By refusing God's offer, they live under the threat that this false existence might in fact remain an eternity for them.

The deceit of men and women who are justified and sanctified by God creates this *factum brutum*.<sup>510</sup> Every attempt to understand the *simul iustus et peccator* "dialectically" must founder on this fact. Sinners who are justified and sanctified by God advance toward their condemnation. The consideration that futile falsehood certainly cannot cancel out God's gracious truth changes nothing on this score. For above all, the nothingness and futility of sin consists precisely in the effective success of its futility in relation to human beings. If men and women carry on down the path laid by sin's success, then they are guilty—that is, they have gambled away every claim to God's grace. Even in view of God's mercy, they can no longer soften the bite of their situation.

Certainly—so long as humans still exist in the world—falsehood is nothing other than the *attempt* to expose oneself (nonsensically) to God's condemnation. Because humans are not yet condemned, and given the constant advent of God's Word, the *hope* remains for them that God does not allow himself to be provoked. That is to say, as sinners generally remain God's *good* creatures, so even those in the thrall of falsehood remain God's *new* creation because of the effectiveness of the Word of the cross and resurrection (*extra se*).<sup>511</sup> Hence, we can assert the necessity of condemnation in principle just as little as we can assert the necessity of grace in principle. This is already a theme of eschatology.

<sup>507</sup> CD IV/3, p. 466.

<sup>508</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 467.

<sup>509</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 469ff.

<sup>510</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 463.

<sup>511</sup> Creaturely being and *new* creaturely being are certainly not identical. For "salvation is more than being. . . . Salvation is the perfect being which is not proper to created being as such but is still future" (CD IV/1, p. 7). Within this approach, Barth does not think of "salvation" for instance as the highest kind of being (*contra* von Balthasar, in the foreword to the German text of *Karl Barth. Darstellung und Deutung seiner Theologie*, p. iii). The "being" of the new creation is a totally different being which does not stand on par with creation. The creation remains (worldly) creation. As such, it is brought into relation with the salvation won *extra mundum* by God's reconciliation. But the event of this relation is at the same time also the "confirmation and restoration of the order of creation" (CD IV/3, p. 46).

EXCURSUS: THE RELATION OF CHRISTIANS  
AND NON-CHRISTIANS

For these reasons, in Barth's account, the condemnation of those who play false would appear not to pertain to non-Christians. But this would be a hasty conclusion.

Considered from the point of view of the doctrine of election, the contrast between the Christian and the non-Christian can be only a relative one. It is "not identical with that of elected and rejected."<sup>512</sup> For *all* human beings are elected in Jesus Christ. Christians distinguish themselves from non-Christians only insofar as they belong together with them. Both are witness to the *one* truth: Christians as genuine witnesses, non-Christians as "indirect witnesses."<sup>513</sup> Christians are set under God's determination to attest his gracious work; non-Christians are set under God's determination to make visible those to whom grace is addressed (even if they do so unwillingly).

The relative difference between Christians and non-Christians is therefore an *ontic* difference. Consistent with his understanding of faith as recognition and acknowledgment, Barth sees this difference established by a fluid boundary of recognition. Among Christians, the recognition of God is predominant, among non-Christians the non-recognition of God.<sup>514</sup> Nevertheless, the measure of recognition or non-recognition of individuals cannot be the criterion for adjudging a Christian to be a Christian. Jesus Christ himself sets this criterion through the awakening of his "earthly-historical form of existence," the church.<sup>515</sup> In it he calls *together* "individuals in their multiplicity" and in the midst of everyone else constitutes them "a special people."<sup>516</sup> This people is determined to represent the "new reality of the world and man" created by reconciliation;<sup>517</sup> it bears witness to reconciliation in the world by repenting time and again and by inviting the rest of the world to repentance.

The consequences of this line of thinking for the relation of church and world are not drawn out here.<sup>518</sup> What is important for our investigation is that Christians and non-Christians belong together ontologically because they are all elected and reconciled. They even belong together ontically insofar as

<sup>512</sup> CD II/2, p. 327.

<sup>513</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 458.

<sup>514</sup> CD IV/3, p. 192.

<sup>515</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 681.

<sup>516</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 682.

<sup>517</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 713.

<sup>518</sup> On this see O. Weber, "Kirche und Welt nach Karl Barth," in *Antwort*, p. 217ff., as well as C. Bäumler, *Die Lehre von der Kirche in der Theologie Karl Barths*, Wolf et al., eds., *Theologische Existenz heute*, n.s. 118 (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1964), p. 8ff.

they all exist sinfully, each group in its own way. They are only distinguished by the *act of God* which creates the church. God's act for the *whole* of sinful humanity intends to succeed in the world through the church which exists in the world. The community is assembled and called for this purpose. And in this lies the particular dignity of Christians (which is certainly the dignity of the cross and suffering).

From the missionary nature of the church, it follows at once that each non-Christian is a potential Christian.<sup>519</sup> In its peculiar existence the church is also place-holder for non-Christians.<sup>520</sup> But what emerges from this is the fact that the sin of non-Christians has fundamentally the same results as the sin of Christians. Non-Christians are also rushing toward their condemnation, but the same hope that exists for Christians exists for them as well.

<sup>519</sup> Cf. CD IV/3, p. 810.

<sup>520</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 933.

## VI

### Nothingness and Sin in Light of the Coming of Jesus Christ

Eschatology answers the question of the "future" of nothingness and sin with regard to the return of Jesus Christ. Barth did not develop his eschatology fully. He thus gave no explicit answer to this question. But the basic features of his eschatology that can be recognized from the available volumes of the *Church Dogmatics* allow us to give a definite answer consistent with his thinking.

#### PRINCIPLES OF A CHRISTOLOGICALLY GROUNDED ESCHATOLOGY

Christian eschatology does not inquire into the *possibility* of the being of Jesus Christ; neither does it inquire into the future possibility of human existence in itself. Rather, it must be sketched out entirely on the basis of the *reality of the being of Jesus Christ*.

To this extent eschatology is subject to the same hermeneutic direction as the doctrine of election, and so its task cannot be to draw out consequences from the doctrine of election; if this were done, election would necessarily be misunderstood as a principle for all theological thinking.

The difference between the doctrine of election and eschatology is grounded in a different ingredient in the being of Jesus Christ itself. The doctrine of election considers the reality of the being of Jesus Christ as a reality that is *before* all (human) existence. The doctrine of reconciliation speaks of the reality of the being of Jesus Christ *in* human time. Eschatology deals with this reality as a reality *after* all (human) time. The reality of the being of Jesus Christ is *one* reality in this difference.

From this it follows that the future dimension does not need to be

“added” to the reality of the being of Jesus Christ; it possesses it in same way that it possesses the past and the present. And so on one hand, Barth argues that we must dispute any notion that as an act of God the being of Jesus Christ has *only* a future dimension for us.<sup>521</sup> On the other hand, it must hold that talk of God’s future action has no criterion other than the being of Jesus Christ himself. This yields the following implications.

First, if the reality of the being of Jesus Christ is the reality of his being *for us*, then the future of the being of Jesus Christ is also a future *for us*. To this extent it is grounded in the potential of God’s grace for us and not in any shortcoming in the event of reconciliation.<sup>522</sup> But the potential of God’s grace for us is the *freedom* in which God has mercy on human beings. Because it is a *gracious* future, therefore, the future of Jesus Christ cannot be disposed over by human beings. Furthermore, the coming of Jesus Christ at the end of all time has its “primal and basic pattern” in the Easter event.<sup>523</sup> What occurred in that event “was already . . . the revelation of the kingdom of God, of the gracious Judge of all men, and of the life of all the dead.”<sup>524</sup> In the final coming of Jesus Christ, this revelation will be made visible and hold good for all people, for the whole world. To this extent, the coming of Jesus Christ at the end of time is not a surpassing of God’s reconciling act for us. And finally, the future of Jesus Christ is definite. Hence the future expectation of Christians—Christian hope—is also definite. This hope is not rendered ambiguous by the fact that Jesus Christ will at that time encounter men and women as a *judge*. Jesus Christ is, after all, “not an unknown judge of fable, but He who is well-known to the Christian” and whose judgment is the judgment of his grace.<sup>525</sup> Thus, the hope of faith orients itself specifically to the event of this judgment—a hope that is admittedly called into question by *sin*. That it is so called into question makes it necessary to specify theologically the nature of faith’s hope in the judgment of Jesus Christ.

<sup>521</sup> *Contra* Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, trans. J. W. Leitch (London: SCM Press, 1967), p. 190 passim. Because Jesus Christ as the future always affects the past and the present as well, Barth can certainly expand the concept of the “eschatological” to the extent that the “happening of the parousia is thus eschatological throughout its course” (CD IV/3, p. 296.). Here, Barth is in agreement with R. Bultmann, notwithstanding the polemic.

<sup>522</sup> Cf. above p. 83.

<sup>523</sup> CD IV/3, p. 293.

<sup>524</sup> CD III/2, p. 489. This “already” grounds eschatology but does not make it impossible, as has frequently been asserted against Barth (cf. H. Grass, “Das eschatologische Problem in der Gegenwart,” in *Dank an Paul Althaus*, eds. W. Künneth and W. Joest [Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1958], p. 58; and T. Stadtland, *Eschatologie und Geschichte in der Theologie des jungen Karl Barth* [Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1966], p. 185ff.).

<sup>525</sup> CD IV/3, p. 922.

## THE JUDGMENT OF JESUS CHRIST AND THE SINNER

In Barth's view, the primary thing that ought to be considered is that the judgment of Jesus Christ can mean neither an addition to the justification of the sinner nor the calling into question of the same. Were it to be identified with the completion of justification, it would be just such an addition. Again, were this judgment to decide about the sinner again and differently, it would be just such a calling into question. In contrast to both these misunderstandings, the Pauline view of judgment according to works can help us to achieve a correct understanding of the final judgment.<sup>526</sup>

When Paul speaks of judgment according to works, he is arguing from the justification of the sinner. He impresses judgment according to works upon *Christians* (!) by *looking back* to justification (cf. 1 Thess. 5:5, with 5:2). Justification takes place on the basis of the exclusion of works. But justified persons are not persons who have nothing more to do with works. They are of course free "from *the compulsion* to work," but precisely in such a way as to be "really free for the work" of love.<sup>527</sup> Because this work of believers exists, they are subject to judgment according to works. However, justification cannot be called into question by this judgment (cf. 1 Cor. 3:15b). On the contrary, it *confirms* justification by revealing the works of the Christian to be the works of those who are justified (and *not* the works of those who are *to be* justified). Thus, it is also neither a surpassing nor a supplementation of justification *sola fidei*.

Therefore while "under the law works are done for the sake of judgment, under grace they are done for the sake of the justification that has already occurred."<sup>528</sup> By talk of a judgment according to works, Paul wants to drive home that there certainly is no justification through works, but neither is there a justification without the works of the justified which correspond to it.<sup>529</sup>

The fall of the justified persons back to the righteousness of the law (Gal. 4:8) would consist in their taking the judgment that exists for the works of those who are justified and recasting it into a judgment that exists for their justifying works. This endeavor can only bring God's *wrath* upon human beings

<sup>526</sup> For what follows see Jüngel, *Paulus und Jesus*, p. 66ff., and "Das Gesetz zwischen Adam und Christus," p. 70ff.

<sup>527</sup> Jüngel, "Das Gesetz zwischen Adam und Christ," p. 73.

<sup>528</sup> Jüngel, *Paulus und Jesus*, p. 69.

<sup>529</sup> This is not a "pedagogical maxim" (argues Stuhlmacher, *Gerechtigkeit Gottes bei Paulus*, p. 230). Paul certainly does not emphasize works, but rather *righteous faith*. This is a difference!—Stuhlmacher attempts to explain Pauline talk of judgment according to works as part of a sketch "of a justification drawn out and divided into two stages" (p. 232). But in this approach the nature of this judgment remains unclear. For if God's righteousness is fulfilled as *proof of divine power* in the final judgment, then human works play no role anyway. But if works, understood as the completion of justification, are decisive for this judgment, then justification is understood as justification by works.

(cf. Rom. 2:5ff.). Without God's justifying work upon them, men and women are lost once again. But because they know the One who will direct their work, judgment according to works cannot now redound to their fear (Rom. 8:15).

This is precisely Barth's point regarding the last judgment. The positive meaning of the judgment of Jesus Christ is not a universally extended judgment based on the law, but rather a judgment according to works (no longer justifying) which people who have come to faith have enacted. It is necessary, therefore, only for the sake of *those who believe*. They will receive the praise that corresponds to their works (1 Cor. 4:5). And seemingly good works that cannot abide will be shown to be such. Where it is a matter of works, judgment will be without regard for persons (Rom. 2:11). Said simply, in the judgment of Jesus Christ, it is not the persons of those justified before God that are primarily at issue. They will be saved—through the fire of judgment according to works (1 Cor. 3:15). "Strictly speaking, it is not possible to have *faith* in another decision than this."<sup>530</sup> However, the completely absurd thing about the action of sinners consists in their desire for a judge who can only condemn them as regards their works.

This paradox would become a proposition of ecclesiastical eschatology if one were to allow disbelief *and* belief to be the facts or works to be judged in the judgment of Jesus Christ, a judgment which would then necessarily have legal character. The "twilight" of the "divided expectation" that would result from such an understanding is, in truth, a product of a human deceitfulness that refuses even to make faith's hope in Jesus Christ its own.<sup>531</sup>

At this point we observe that according to the biblical witness, the judgment of Jesus Christ will have universal character and will therefore also affect those who in our judgment have enacted no works of faith. But we must note here that the present empirical situation, for instance, is not made into the situation of judgment. Each so-called nonbeliever who is not a member of the community still remains elected and *determined* for faith. A church that hopes for the condemnation of such people and teaches accordingly would no longer be a church of Jesus Christ. The church knows only that human beings, justified in the last judgment before God, will no longer be *sinners*, neither in their being nor in their existence. That, for the unrighteous, the end of "being a sinner" could simultaneously mean also the end of his or her being as God's human creatures is, of course, something to be feared by the sinner, and every human is a sinner. But given the reality of Jesus Christ, it is

<sup>530</sup> K. Barth, *Credo* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962), p. 171.

<sup>531</sup> Cf. CD IV/3, p. 907.

neither to be believed in nor hoped for. As an account of its hope in Jesus Christ, the church's eschatology can only interpret such a fear as an intensification of the church's task to call persons with all urgency to faith *here* and *now*. It must submit everything else to the freedom of the grace of God.

Assertion of an abstract final judgment is therefore not an ingredient in the message of Christ. Yet, in Barth's view, the opposite abstraction—the doctrine of the *apokatastasis panton*—must also be disputed with the *same* arguments, as it too is an un-Christian proposition.<sup>532</sup> The former subjects God's grace to the principle of the legality of sin. This latter makes grace itself a principle. In one case, as in the other, the *freedom* of God's grace is not heeded.<sup>533</sup>

Barth is reproached for the fact that his theology would seem necessarily to lead to the doctrine of the *apokatastasis panton*, whether he wanted it to or not. Barth, it is claimed, would be inconsistent if he were to shy away from this doctrine.<sup>534</sup> And indeed Barth is not satisfied with simple rejection of the idea of the *apokatastasis panton*. For in the knowledge of Jesus Christ we possess "no good reason why we should forbid ourselves, or be forbidden, openness to the possibility that in the reality of God and man in Jesus Christ there is contained much more than we might expect . . . that in the truth of this reality there might be contained the super-abundant promise of the final deliverance of all men."<sup>535</sup>

Barth's statement is *not* to be understood, however, as the "dialectical" corrective to his rejection of the doctrine of the *apokatastasis panton*.<sup>536</sup> Neither God's freedom nor God's grace can be calculated "dialectically," because both are *one event*. Eschatology points forward to this event as the future of the reality of Jesus Christ, but does so without making grace into the general principle of this event.<sup>537</sup> So it is doubtful that Barth identifies the positive hope

<sup>532</sup> Cf. CD II/2, p. 417.

<sup>533</sup> "He [God] Himself directs His own affairs. This is what makes these two statements impossible" (CD II/2, p. 419).

<sup>534</sup> Cf., for example, E. Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, vol. 1 of his *Dogmatics*, trans. O. Wyon (London: Lutterworth, 1949), p. 352; G. C. Berkouwer, *The Triumph of Grace*, p. 116; as well as the questions in the work of W. Kreck, *Die Zukunft des Gekommenen. Grundprobleme der Eschatologie* (Munich, Chr. Kaiser, 1961), p. 143ff.

<sup>535</sup> CD IV/3, pp. 477–78.

<sup>536</sup> For example, according to P. Althaus both must be claimed—the twofold outcome of the judgment and the *apokatastasis panton* (cf. *Die letzten Dinge. Entwurf einer christlichen Eschatologie*, 3rd ed. [Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1926], p. 214). So the truth has to be sought in the antithetical character of both assertions. The question is only whether in this way anything definite at all can be voiced concerning the truth.

<sup>537</sup> That grace is a general principle is—according to Barth—a claim advanced by human falsehood (cf. CD IV/3, p. 440). Cf. also H. Vogel, *Gott in Christo*, p. 1017—the doctrine of the *apokatastasis* abstracts from the concrete situation in which grace addresses the sinner; it is described from the "position of the spectator."

of faith with the positive content of the doctrine of the *apokatastasis panton*. If the reality of God's free grace contains "even yet more" than we are able to expect, then this can only mean that it also contains more than the doctrine of the *apokatastasis panton* imagines. This doctrine, therefore, remains a doctrine that calculates the possibilities of grace in a worldly way. But such a calculation has already been surpassed in the reality of the free grace of God itself. The *event* of this reality is the surpassing of any such calculation.

The *factum* of the death of the human person puts a question to the understanding of the judgment of Jesus Christ that we have been expressing. If all human life ends in *death*, is not hope in Jesus Christ's return an illusion!?

Barth finds unacceptable the theory that from death until the resurrection human beings linger in an "intermediary state," because such a state would certainly be one marked by the absence of Jesus Christ. The same is true of the orthodox doctrine that after death and until the resurrection of the dead only the soul is in a blessed or unblessed state.<sup>538</sup> This doctrine tears apart the integrity of human beings as the souls of their bodies and isolates human death from the return of Jesus Christ.

According to Barth, in these instances the problem is approached from the wrong side. Rather, from the very outset, the death of human beings must be understood on the basis of the return of Jesus Christ. That is to say, even in the face of death the expectation of Christians is oriented to Jesus Christ himself. In Barth's view, then, this expectation can only be an *imminent expectation*.<sup>539</sup> But hope in the imminence of Jesus Christ relativizes death's posturing as an absolute monopoly. For hope, the return of Jesus Christ is the real form of the end of human life; death, on the other hand, is only the "provisional substitute or mask of the true end."<sup>540</sup>

In saying this, Barth quite characteristically fine-tuned his view of human death, which we have already discussed.<sup>541</sup> The natural delimitation of human life is not an absolute delimitation because the goal of this life is the coming of Jesus Christ. But this goal still has the form of death,<sup>542</sup> because God still graciously grants time to human beings.<sup>543</sup> Accordingly, death is the form

<sup>538</sup> Cf. H. Schmid, *The Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, 3rd ed., trans. C. A. Hay and H. E. Jacobs (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1961), p. 624ff; and H. Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, trans. G. T. Thomson (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1950), p. 695ff.

<sup>539</sup> Cf. CD III/2, p. 491. With this Barth disputes the material connection of the imminent expectation and the *delay of the paraousia* (cf. also, pp. 492, 509). Jesus Christ himself brings about the time of his coming. The relation of the previous and future coming of the time of Jesus makes it possible to characterize the expectation of Jesus Christ as *imminent* expectation.

<sup>540</sup> CD IV/3, p. 926.

<sup>541</sup> Cf. above p. 45f.

<sup>542</sup> Cf. CD IV/3, p. 926.

<sup>543</sup> Cf. above p. 83.

which the return of Christ has for the *individual* as distinct from the universal return. Therefore, at the end of their temporal lives people have to expect the judge Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is a *gracious* judge. For this reason, as the wages of sin death cannot render faith's hope ambiguous or otherwise spoil it. Hope in Jesus Christ makes *definite* the end of the human creature in the face of the absurd possibility of being lost. Hopelessness in the face of death would, therefore, be a relapse into sin.<sup>544</sup> For the hope of faith, the definitiveness of the temporal end of human life consists in the revelation of the new being gained by humans in the reconciliation. In eternal life, both the existence and the being of human persons will be free from sin. There sin will be an *impossible reality*.<sup>545</sup>

But if Christians hope for their end in this sense, this does not mean that the character of their hope is privatized. They can only hope for their end in this way because they hope for the universal return of Jesus Christ. For instance, what should befall the *whole* community—and indeed *every* human person<sup>546</sup>—does not occur in an isolated way in the death of the individual. Even if for many individuals it occurs in the form of death, the return of Jesus Christ remains *one* return because beyond our time Jesus Christ is the one who will return in unity with the past and the present.

### THE JUDGMENT OF JESUS CHRIST AND NOTHINGNESS

If, according to its nature, the last judgment is to be interpreted solely within the horizon of the hope of faith, then in Barth's view it must be understood as the goal of God's *opus proprium* and at the same time as "the *termination* of His *opus alienum*."<sup>547</sup> In relation to nothingness this means two things. First, it means that in eternity, God's "Yes" to humans will no longer be accompanied by God's "No." It also means, second, that where God no longer says "No," nothingness can "no longer exist."<sup>548</sup>

But such an "audacious" statement on Barth's part must remain entirely an expression of the hope of faith.<sup>549</sup> That is to say, it must be understood neither

<sup>544</sup> Cf. CD IV/3, p. 926.

<sup>545</sup> Hence it is impossible to claim in virtue of the presupposition of the pre- and post-temporal existence of the soul that for human individuals sin renews itself again and again "even beyond earthly life" and thus continues in eternity" (so argues Müller, *The Christian Doctrine of Sin*, vol. 2, p. 483). Death brings an *end* to the human existence in all of its relations. There is only existence after death as *new* existence, which corresponds to the new being. Faith's hope can make no statements about an "existence" of those condemned by God, because both theological and ontological presuppositions fail here.

<sup>546</sup> Cf. CD IV/3, p. 931.

<sup>547</sup> CD III/3, p. 362.

<sup>548</sup> Ibid.

<sup>549</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 364.

as an isolated ontological proposition about nothingness nor as an answer to questions about the possible structures of eternity. In other words, the construction of an ontology of heaven narrows the possibilities of the free grace of God. This is just as true if we assume that nothingness (as "hell") will also "be" in eternity, as that place where its dissolution into *nihil negativum* is postulated. On the first reading, there must necessarily also be a condemnation of humans into "hell"; on the second, all humans must necessarily be saved or else nothing happens to them at all.<sup>550</sup> In both cases God's grace can only be *enacted* within a framework that is already worked out; but it can no longer simply *eventuate*.

For these reasons faith cannot understand the end of nothingness as the terminus of a process of development. It knows that nothingness *is* destroyed in the death of Jesus Christ. Accordingly it also hopes for the universal and effective *event of the revelation* of this destruction in the judgment of Jesus Christ. This free act of judgment for which faith hopes has its archetypal image in the death of Jesus Christ. In it, nothingness is stripped of the power to seize and to draw others into annihilation.<sup>551</sup> This stripping is the disempowerment of nothingness; seen from the perspective of the judgment of Jesus Christ, it should be thought of as God withdrawing the "No" to which nothingness owes itself. In accordance with his revelation, God is not compelled to say "No" to nothingness eternally.<sup>552</sup> God's action *aims only* at the "Yes" to the creature. Where God needs only to say "Yes," nothingness has lost its meaning for both God and the creature. There need no longer be any talk of it then. For nothingness then no longer exists as something passing away in ruination. It will have truly *vanished for* both God and the creature. In the horizon of faith's hope, therefore, nothing can be said regarding its fate.

Nothingness will certainly not be *forgotten* even in eternity. For if the creature will be freed from nothingness, God himself will remain scarred by the traces of the battle with nothingness. These traces on God himself will be

<sup>550</sup> For this reason Barth cannot make hell in itself a presupposition because the question of hell is first decided in the judgment of Jesus Christ. The ongoing existence of an entire sphere of nothingness independent of the judgment of Jesus Christ has not been felt to be a problem in the tradition (cf. Article 9 of the "Solid Declaration" of the Lutheran *Formula of Concord*, in *The Book of Concord*, ed. T. Tappert et al. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), p. 610. But its assertion is just as problematic as is Schleiermacher's denial, since in one as in the other an ontology of eternity constructed in analogy to the world establishes limits to the judgment of Jesus Christ. If Luther could not think of eternity without a "hell in itself," then Schleiermacher could imagine no eternal felicity in the knowledge of individual damned men and women (cf. Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, §163, p. 717f). So Luther has no doubt concerning the damnation of nonbelievers, while Schleiermacher has none concerning the universal "restoration of all souls" (ibid.).

<sup>551</sup> Cf. above p. 83.

<sup>552</sup> Cf. CD III/3, pp. 362–63.

the guarantee for redeemed human beings that a new confrontation between God and nothingness is not impending. And it is precisely this that even now makes the question of the ontological place or status of disempowered nothingness *theologically* unimportant. This also holds even where the return of Jesus Christ takes the form of death for individuals. For women and men on whom God has mercy in Jesus Christ, it will only be important that *for them* salvation means both the disempowering and destruction of nothingness. That is to say, their hope—like that of every human being—is not directed toward an eternity whose character is itself discernible, but rather solely toward Jesus Christ himself.



## VII

### Conclusion

Karl Barth's dogmatic theology is not an extended and developed doctrine of sin. Yet neither is his doctrine of sin merely a special problem at the periphery of his theology, which must be discussed at a certain point, after which it is really no longer of interest. Rather, the problems of nothingness and sin accompany the elucidation of each important dogmatic problem. Time and time again they become thematic in a new way, whether in the prolegomena, the doctrine of God, the doctrine of creation, the doctrine of reconciliation or eschatology. We cannot discuss the knowledge of God, God himself, and God's works without also discussing nothingness and sin. If discussion of nothingness and of sin is omitted, then in Barth's judgment we also omit to speak properly of either God *or* human beings.

For what God is as *God* and what humans are *qua human* is manifest in the confrontation of God and the human creature with nothingness and sin. This confrontation is God's revelation in Jesus Christ. Any talk of divinity and humanity which consciously or unconsciously overlooks this confrontation overlooks both God and human beings. For this reason, for Barth all talk of both God and the human creature must be related cardinally to this *revelation*.

Thus, every discussion of God and humanity at once involves the problems of nothingness and sin. And in this sense time and again the doctrine of nothingness and sin functions to orient all theological discussion from and toward revelation in Jesus Christ. Orienting all theological discussion in such a way does not entail a narrowing, but in fact entails an inexhaustible expansion of the theological horizon. This is because theological statements are now delimited no longer by what humans already know and say, but only by God's ever *new* action in his revelation in accordance with the divine identity.

But Barth's doctrine of sin does not only serve the novel function of orienting all theological talk from and toward revelation. It also renders an

important service to the understanding of what "revelation" means. Revelation, in the sense described, could be understood superficially as the *principle* of a theological-philosophical deduction. But according to its nature, revelation is the *event* of God's free grace in Jesus Christ for sinful humans—an event over which we are not at liberty to dispose. When understood as God's confrontation with human sin, the nature of this revelation *cannot* be passed over. For it would contradict the character of God in Jesus Christ, who may be known in revelation, to come to terms with sin any differently than in the *event* of his grace for sinners. To this extent, Barth's doctrine of sin also has the function of preserving the *historicity* of revelation.

The two theological functions of the doctrine of sin that we have identified are not always clearly recognizable in Barth's work in the way they have been described here. But they have become evident in the course of the investigation which now lies behind us. Theologically, interest in human sin can only be interest in the event of God's free grace for human beings.

Such an interest has certainly been guided by insight into the character of God's free grace. It did not require the detour—customary in dogmatic tradition—through an abstractly governed evaluation of sin, against whose background revelation could subsequently be set forth that much more clearly. But the theological payoff of Barth's approach lies in the fact that now sin can no longer be judged in and of itself by the criterion of an "imprecise" action of God in the law, but only by the criterion of the event of the relation of gospel and law in Jesus Christ. That is to say, now the judgment that God has passed upon sin in his revelation has in every respect become the criterion for theological discourse about sin.

The consequences that follow from this are far-reaching. Dogmatically submerged but yet unresolved problems in the doctrine of sin are set out in a new way. Propositions from the typical legal doctrine of sin are pushed farther and distinctions drawn out. The results are new perspectives for evaluating the contemporary reality of the world. And this is rooted in the fact, moving from God's judgment upon sin as *the* criterion, that the question of the *being* of sin has to be made thematic. God's judgments always have ontological significance—even for sin. It is precisely the ontic and actual reality of sin, as it can be known in and from revelation, which requires that sin be differentiated ontologically from the human, from the world and from God.

We have indicated the complex problems which are thereby opened up and how these problems must be resolved. In the course of this exposition, Barth's doctrine of sin has shown itself to be a *work of careful differentiation*. I do not chiefly mean the arrangement of things on the surface. Rather, I mean that it only became possible to venture statements about sin on the basis of

the proper criterion by way of certain distinctions. Sin needed to be distinguished from nothingness and its other forms, nothingness from God and from creation, and creatures from their sin. It became difficult to draw these distinctions owing to the self-concealing combination of nothingness and its forms with creaturely reality, to the impossibility of making ontological remarks about nothingness and its forms as are made about other entities, and to the double peril of monistic and dualistic ways of considering so-called "evil." Nevertheless, the ontological gain of such distinctions is immense. It consists in insight into the differentiated ontic reality of nothingness and its forms as well as into the character of its mode of working and effects.

Hence, the ontological question concerning nothingness and sin did not lead directly away from their actual ontic reality, but directly into it. And this did not occur in such a way that in the end we had to exclaim this reality in dark heavy words. Even though it was understood as a reality inexplicable given the identity of *God*, it could be described clearly and precisely as such. That this clarity cannot be identified with a theological justification of the actual reality of nothingness and sin already came to light in Barth's doctrine of election. It became completely clear, however, in eschatology. Perhaps in order to guard against many of the misunderstandings indicated, the *problem-atique* of nothingness and sin ought to have been set in the context of eschatology from the outset. However, it became clear that in Barth's work, the entire doctrine of nothingness is already treated materially within this horizon in the doctrine of election. Precisely in this way space for the question of the ontological significance of the ontic reality of nothingness and its forms was freed up in a theologically legitimate way.

Our interpretation needed in part to summarize Barth's answer to this question and in part to make it more precise, as well as in part to criticize it. The result was that, thinking from God's judgment, nothingness in its forms has the character of antithetical-anhypostatic being. That is to say, without ontological ground and determined by God only for nihilation, it is in this nihilation in such a way that—concealing itself all the while—it draws creaturely being with it into its passing.

Barth saw and described this characteristic of nothingness in his own way. But it is striking that he did not draw out more detailed consequences from this for the description of the events of God's grace with sinners. He justifies the necessity for his detailed doctrine of sin primarily upon the need to know *in what* the sin with which God contends in reconciliation consists.<sup>553</sup> That the particular character of nothingness and its forms also influences the

<sup>553</sup> Cf. *CD* IV/1, p. 138ff.

character of reconciliation in a certain way only becomes clear on the periphery. By this, we in no way mean that God can allow his action to be placed under a law by nothingness. But fresh light can be thrown upon the character of God's confrontation with nothingness by attending to the particular character of nothingness itself.

For the sake of sinners, God exposes himself in reconciliation to the self-concealing nihilation of nothingness. In the course of this, God turns upon himself the fullest extent of the nihilation of nothingness. But even this nihilation is veiled, as is the fashion of nothingness. The nihilation of God in the death of Jesus Christ in and of itself could be an egregious event that unstops the ears of all who attend to it to hear what is happening there. The evangelists' reports of the passion with the earthquake, etc., seem to want to indicate something thereby. But because it was *nothingness* to which God delivered himself in order in this way to make an end to its annihilating, the worldly ambiguity of this event is not accidental. When, in Jesus Christ, God gives himself over to the act of nothingness, he himself suffers to hand over his merciful act to the explanations of nothingness. Of course, in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, exactly what happened on the cross becomes clear; here the eyes of men and women are opened to see that nothingness was conquered by God precisely in its greatest triumph over him. Human beings now learn the difference—which is vitally important for them—between God's truth and the deceit of nothingness. They learn this through *faith*. But they learn it also in the midst of a world in which nothingness still governs—again, because of God's mercy toward sinners. In this world the nothingness in human sin makes us forget what happened on the cross of Jesus Christ. In keeping with its own nature, it makes us forget its own demise by making itself forget. Thus it celebrates its triumph without our noticing it. The catastrophes it brings about here are given all possible names. All possible causes are found for them. But their true cause has caused itself to be forgotten.

An unteachable church tried to stop it with preaching and the administration of the law. The true work of nothingness was promoted rather than hindered by this, concealed rather than disclosed. For indeed nothingness is concealed in legality. Human persons entrapped by sin live in the conviction—*rightly*—that they must live according to the law. This law may bear the name of reason, of nature, of an ideology, or even of God. Sinners do not feel threatened by it. For the threat of the radiant law in and of itself only confirms sinners in the view that it *does not concretely pertain to them*.

Proclamation of the cross and resurrection would be threatened in exactly the same way if it were similarly exposed to the explanations of nothingness. But it is not. It is not because, according to its content, such proclamation is

itself the undermining of these explanations. God destroyed nothingness by taking the futile nihilation of nothingness upon himself. But by taking up nothingness in worldly ambiguity, God challenged *human judgments* about this event. Humans can only judge God truly when they are made capable of doing so by God himself; otherwise they restate the explanations of nothingness. Hence the point of Christian proclamation is to challenge people to adjudicate the cross and the resurrection of Jesus Christ according to its meaning as the cross and the resurrection *of Jesus Christ*. Where this challenge is taken up, what has long been forgotten becomes present once again. For people are then required to *differentiate* between God and nothingness, between self and sin. And the enactment of this differentiation will no longer be the work of nothingness. Only God's revelation itself makes human beings capable of doing this. And the ontological transformation which happens to human beings in the death of Jesus Christ by the destruction of nothingness receives *concrete meaning* for their existence in this way. For they cannot enact this differentiation without *affirming* it. When enacted, it becomes vitally necessary for believers; it is grounded in the real and effective distinction between nothingness and God's creatures which God himself has sealed in the death of Jesus Christ. When, through faith, women and men correspond to this in their existence, they are liberated concretely from nothingness and its forms.

Of course Christian proclamation as such cannot effect this liberation. It is God's work. But proclamation must ever stir up, invite, and encourage people afresh to form a true judgment about the act of God's free grace by the very proclamation of this act. Certainly in this undertaking, everything depends upon the fact that it is really God's act, and not some kind of nihilating deception, that is being declared. The point of Karl Barth's doctrine of sin and nothingness is to help proclamation to accomplish this task.



## VIII

### Perspectives

#### THE CHRISTIAN LIFE AND NOTHINGNESS

The lecture fragments of Barth's ethics of reconciliation published from his literary remains emphatically underscore one perspective which is a consequence of our investigation.<sup>554</sup> The Christian life is enacted through involvement in God's struggle against the dominance of sin and of nothingness. In Jesus Christ, God acts as a "partner" of human creatures and summons them to responsible partnership in their own lives.<sup>555</sup> This summons is also pertinent to human conduct in relation to sin and nothingness. Together with use of the possibilities afforded God's free creatures, humans should also risk "revolt" and struggle against the dominance of nothingness in the world.<sup>556</sup> The "zeal for God's honour" which determines the Christian life in its positive orientation<sup>557</sup> has as its inevitable consequence precisely this struggle. For Christians learn from Jesus Christ that nothingness is not "an ineluctable fate" that has befallen them to which they can only resign themselves.<sup>558</sup> Even less does faith in Jesus Christ imply the view that what is at stake here is merely an insignificant problem for humans *post Christum natum*. Rather, in the world in which God's graceful way with humanity has not yet been completed, God's partner—according to Barth—is summoned and empowered to *take nothingness seriously in a manner which corresponds to God*.

On the one hand, what corresponds to God is to take nothingness seriously as the terrible state of affairs which, from beginning to end, God alone

<sup>554</sup> Karl Barth, *The Christian Life. Church Dogmatics IV/4 Lecture Fragment*, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1981).

<sup>555</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 7, 27–29.

<sup>556</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 206.

<sup>557</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 111ff.

<sup>558</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 149.

is able to handle. And so the view that nothingness is no longer threatening cannot be what motivates Christian struggle against it and its effects. Men and women who are no match for nothingness are summoned to such a struggle. Thus, in the whole of his ethics, Barth gives particular attention to all those activities of Christians in which God's victory over nothingness is confused with human strategies for such a victory.<sup>559</sup> Without recognition of their own sin, human persons are unsuited for this struggle.<sup>560</sup> Here they can only renounce "all glory of his own."<sup>561</sup> For this reason, the view that Barth plays down the seriousness of evil as a historical fact gains absolutely no purchase, especially in the *practical dimension* of his understanding of the Christian life.

On the other hand, the correspondence between human conduct and God's struggle against nothingness has nothing at all to do with some sort of "pessimism and defeatism" in relation to nothingness.<sup>562</sup> On the contrary, in the ethics of the Christian life, Barth also lays out the basic insight of his doctrine of nothingness: namely, that for him it has "no final power, significance, or dignity of its own."<sup>563</sup> Hence, for Christians given over to confession of Jesus Christ and hope for God's Kingdom, the disorder nothingness creates is "not a final reality that cannot be altered."<sup>564</sup> Christians correspond to the judgment of God over nothingness in their lives when they struggle using their human possibilities against the "destruction of his whole creaturely being."<sup>565</sup> This human struggle takes place in *prayer* and in action. Barth portrayed it particularly impressively and graphically as a "revolt and resistance against the regime of vacillation"<sup>566</sup> that makes the God who is known unknown once again, and against the "lordless powers."<sup>567</sup> In doing so, it becomes clear that a Christian struggling in a manner that humanly corresponds to God can never become a "Christian Hercules" whose deeds have "definitive and absolute" range like those of God.<sup>568</sup> The "scope" of Christian resistance

<sup>559</sup> This sort of confusion occurs, for example, in both "religion" and in the "nostrification" of God (cf. *ibid.*, p. 129ff.). On this, see my work, *Der Mensch und die Religion nach Karl Barth*, *Theologische Studien* 125 (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1981), especially p. 10ff.

<sup>560</sup> Cf. Barth, *The Christian Life*, p. 24ff.

<sup>561</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>562</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>563</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 127.

<sup>564</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 212.

<sup>565</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>566</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 174.

<sup>567</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 213. By "lordless powers" Barth understands "man's own abilities loaned to his creaturely nature and peculiar to it" (p. 215) which become independent powers "as a result of the fall" (p. 232).

<sup>568</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 181.

will be enacted exclusively in "steps" which are humanly possible, "provisional and relative."<sup>569</sup> Precisely those persons who know about the reality of the Kingdom can have nothing to do "with the arrogant and foolhardy enterprise of trying to bring in and build up by human hands a religious, cultic, moral, or political kingdom of God on earth."<sup>570</sup> Thus, Barth warns against mistaking this struggle into which the Christian is commanded with the battle for or against any one set of principles or another. What is at stake are concrete human persons who suffer under the effects of nothingness. Christians exist decisively for these people, for they afford these people "courage not to be content with the corruption and evil of the world. . . . Shame on them if they let [these people] surpass them in courage for this!"<sup>571</sup>

Similarly, there is nothing to the view that if one holds onto this dimension of Barth's understanding of the Christian life, his doctrine of nothingness must necessarily lead to "papering over" the actual evil of the human situation with a "christological triumphalism." On the contrary: it is precisely in the ethics of the Christian life that the value of this doctrine comes to light. Because nothingness exists only as a fact already negated by God and destined to perish, a corrective and moderate resistance to its perverse dominance in the world is possible on the part of human beings as well. Christians are set free by God so as not to put up with any concealment of the power of nothingness. They are also put into the position of doing that which is concretely necessary to bettering humanity. As the lives of Christians correspond to the event of God's victory over nothingness, nothingness comes to be seen as nothing other than that against which they are to struggle.

### THE CHARGE OF "MONISM"

The basic intention of the Christian life elucidated above would certainly be incomprehensible if, according to Barth, in response to God's coming into the world Christians were to have to adjudge that nothingness was a reality ultimately willed and planned by God, indeed one necessary for God and human beings. If this were so, the struggle of which Barth speaks in the ethics of reconciliation would by all accounts be play-acting unmercifully imposed upon men and women. All the distinctions in the realm of the experience of evil which Barth troubles over would then basically be superfluous. If Barth were to understand sin as an "aspect of a necessary, ontological process in which the decisive character of human existence and the situation" become

<sup>569</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 187.

<sup>570</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 264.

<sup>571</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 271.

“practically insignificant,” then his ethic of the Christian life would become impossibly inconsistent.<sup>572</sup> Yet we must consider the fact that Barth in his ethics arrives at statements that are wholly different from what he could have said were he to keep with the *monistic way of thinking* imputed to him over and over again. So the question that remains to be asked of all new variations of the charge of monism is whether they properly interpret Barth’s fundamental statements, above all in the doctrine of nothingness.

The charge of monism is further and consistently developed in particular in *Die Realisierung der Freiheit*, a volume edited by Trutz Rendtorff.<sup>573</sup> The contributions to criticism of Karl Barth’s theology collected in this text are aimed at proving that the unconditional self-determination of God is a principle of Barth’s thinking. As a result of this principle, it is argued that Barth must deny every reality alongside and outside of God’s own right to autonomy.<sup>574</sup> In particular, Barth’s doctrine of sin is drawn upon as evidence for this thesis. In this doctrine—it is claimed—it becomes clear that Barth denies human beings the right to be different, by ontologically denying them the possibility of sin.<sup>575</sup> What governs the view of the human creature is compulsory correspondence to the Lord God. Sin, on the other hand, “as the human attempt at immediate self-positing” becomes “irrelevant for thinking about individuality.”<sup>576</sup> But where human persons do not have the chance “to posit” themselves as sinners with respect to God, as a consequence it becomes impossible for there to be a genuine history between God and human beings.

Wilfred Härle’s study of Barth’s ontology also addresses this point. In Barth’s theology, grace is an “ontological principle” of the “origin of nothingness and sin.”<sup>577</sup> That is to say, given the reality of grace, nothingness and sin have to be necessary. Yet, according to Härle, when this occurs, the “contingent character” of both sin and reconciliation is called into question. The “danger which immediately threatens” Karl Barth’s theology is thus “a-historicity.”<sup>578</sup>

<sup>572</sup> So argues W. Härle, *Sein und Gnade. Die Ontologie in Karl Barths Kirchlicher Dogmatik* (Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 1975), p. 327.

<sup>573</sup> T. Rendtorff, ed., *Die Realisierung der Freiheit. Beiträge zur Kritik der Theologie Karl Barths*, (Gütersloh: Gütersloh Verlagshaus, 1975).

<sup>574</sup> For discussion of this thesis, see D. Korsch, “Christologie und Autonomie. Zu einem Interpretationsversuch der Theologie Karl Barths,” *Evangelische Theologie* 41 (1981), pp. 142–70; as well as my review, “Der Realisierung der Freiheit,” *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 105 (1980), pp. 300–3.

<sup>575</sup> Cf. F. Wagner, “Theologische Gleichschaltung. Zur Christologie bei Karl Barth,” in Rendtorff, ed., *Die Realisierung der Freiheit*, p. 29ff.

<sup>576</sup> F. W. Graf, “Die Freiheit der Entsprechung zu Gott. Bemerkungen zum theozentischen Ansatz der Anthropologie Karl Barths” in *ibid.*, p. 116.

<sup>577</sup> Cf. Härle, *Sein und Gnade*, p. 230ff.

<sup>578</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 327.

Two things are striking and characteristic in such understandings of Barth. First, God's grace in Jesus Christ is not understood as *an event* that comes into the world and encounters human beings; rather, grace is understood as a principle for the theological deduction of truth. Accordingly, in theological argument, sin (and nothingness along with it) declines to the status of a state of affairs purportedly positioned to preserve the historical nature of the human relationship to God. But this is exactly what Barth aims to prevent when he orients his thinking to the event of the history of God in Jesus Christ and not to a principle abstracted from out of this history. Any such principle obscures the richness of this history just as much as it obscures its value for human reality.<sup>579</sup> The fact that God does not cease to afford reality to humanity and to make it new can no longer be set forth advantageously. Compared with this, sin might seem a better guarantee of theology's connection to reality. Barth disputed this. Theology becomes more connected to reality when it makes sin the argument for human autonomy and historicity in opposition to God, just as little as humans become more real through the absurdity of sin that destroys everything. For Barth, by contrast, "*magnificare peccatum*" means leading persons to an experience and knowledge of sin which in no way justifies the destructive power of this phenomenon. Support for the effective power of the Word of God is to be sought in the manifold richness of this Word itself and not in sin, for sin does not possess such dignity. It was for this reason that Barth tried to think nothingness, directly in the face of its undisputed actuality, as something that has *in every respect* been negated by God and condemned to pass away.

Our investigation has shown that in the course of this attempt, certain conceptual and material difficulties arise that must be clarified well beyond what Barth himself undertook. What particularly inflames interpretive disagreement is the fact that Barth speaks of God's negation of nothingness in various senses. On one hand, nothingness is what ought not to be. On the other, there is also talk of its genesis under God's "No."<sup>580</sup> If both statements are understood on the basis of a "principle of grace," the interpretation that suggests itself is that what is afoot is a "thinking together" of God and nothingness, that is to say, a "thinking together in antithesis."<sup>581</sup> The two contradictory statements can then be drawn together in the proposition that "in order to be able to be eliminated, what is to be eliminated must first exist."<sup>582</sup>

<sup>579</sup> Thus, Barth repeatedly warned against misunderstanding his theology along the lines of such a principle—cf. CD IV/3, p. 173ff.; CD IV/4, p. 18ff., *The Christian Life*, p. 226.

<sup>580</sup> See above, p. 26.

<sup>581</sup> Cf. Härle, *Sein und Gnade*, p. 269.

<sup>582</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 240. Accordingly, Barth's way of thinking is said to point in the same direction as Hegel's doctrine of evil (p. 264, note 178).

God is then thought of as the "author" of evil<sup>583</sup> and nothingness as that *Antilogie* of the divine will which God must of necessity will in order subsequently to abolish it.<sup>584</sup>

However, if Barth's doctrine of nothingness is understood as a part of his interpretation of the historical event of God's revelation, such an interpretation becomes untenable.<sup>585</sup> The abstract question concerning the "whence of evil"—subsequently supposed to be answered according to the guidelines of an ontology—is not Barth's question as such. Barth's view could be definitively restated with the words of W. Mostert: "To understand evil with the help of the question of its cause, itself proves . . . to be an evil path."<sup>586</sup> Asking this not only allows "the Word of God to get caught up in the wake of the enigma of evil,"<sup>587</sup> it also diverts attention away from the historical phenomenon and task of overcoming evil. Differently than Mostert, Barth certainly does not begin by addressing every possible appearance of nothingness in history. His theme is the concrete phenomenon of nothingness in the history of Jesus Christ which confronts the human person in faith. Barth builds the fundamental negation of evil enacted in this history—which is called "nothingness" because of this negation—right into the doctrine of election. And it is precisely the doctrine of election that refuses to abstract from this history, for it interprets an aspect of this history.<sup>588</sup> This aspect consists in the fact that God's turning to the world and affirming the human creature is an act of God on which men and women can rely. That is to say, faith would be unable to experience this if the history of Christ itself were to aggravate doubt as to whether God can truly be relied upon in this way. But any proclamation and theology that evaluates the evil manifest in human sin from a perspective other than solely that of God's negation and judgment encourages precisely such doubt. Evil then grows to such dimensions that one is led to doubt whether God is capable of winning more than a peripheral and incidental victory against it. But evil is not so momentous in the history of Christ. From the perspective of this history, whenever and wherever something like evil

<sup>583</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 240.

<sup>584</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 312. At this point, Härle takes as his own H.G. Pöhlmann's view (criticized above) that nothingness is a "*real* analogy to God" (cf. p. 241, note 75).

<sup>585</sup> It is evident that such an interpretation draws Barth's thinking into monism's dead end, something Barth himself criticized with great clarity.

<sup>586</sup> W. Mostert, "Gott und das Böse. Bemerkungen zu einer vielschichtigen Frage," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 77 (1980), p. 460.

<sup>587</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 458.

<sup>588</sup> B. Krause, *Leiden Gottes—Leiden des Menschen. Eine Untersuchung zur Kirchlichen Dogmatik Karl Barths, Calwer Theologische Monographien*, Reihe B, Band 6 (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1980), p. 143ff, argues this point correctly.

comes into view, it does so as something destined to pass away, as something which is, in fact, already passing away.

Barth's doctrine of election correspondingly emphasizes that the ontic actuality of nothingness is never anything other than something passing away under God's "No." Nothingness does not exist at all apart from God's negation of it. It only exists because God negates it.<sup>589</sup> Barth's various statements about the "origin" of nothingness under God's "No" must be understood in this sense. It is not a matter of thinking of God as the "originator" of nothingness, as one who uses nothingness for a definite purpose.<sup>590</sup> If this were so, designations such as "abnormal," "absurd," and "impossible" would not be fitting in any case. Barth chooses precisely these kinds of designations to make clear that God can in no sense be thought of as the "ground of being" for nothingness. Under God's "No," nothingness exists as something groundless, so that no purpose can be imagined for the sake of which it might be necessary. To this extent Barth's doctrine of election establishes why it is that nothingness may be understood *only* as something that is and ought to be negated. By contrast, such an understanding would be impossible for a "monistic" way of thinking.

### THE ALTERNATIVES TO BARTH'S UNDERSTANDING OF NOTHINGNESS AND SIN

There are not many alternatives to Barth's understanding of nothingness and sin. The "dualistic" view is ruled out because it calls into question both the divinity of God and belief in creation. Basically the only remaining possibility is to understand the existence of evil as a consequence of creaturely being itself. This in fact is also the direction in which the criticisms of Barth just discussed are moving. In these, sin is understood as a "creaturely possibility"<sup>591</sup> rooted in the *human freedom* for self-determination.<sup>592</sup> If freedom ought really to be understood as a person's capacity for decision, then sin is "necessarily posited"<sup>593</sup> as a possibility (even if not as a realization).

<sup>589</sup> "It 'is' because and as and so long as God is against it"—CD III/3, p. 353.

<sup>590</sup> This conclusion only suggests itself if Barth's talk about the existence of nothingness "by virtue of" God's negation (cf. CD II/1, pp. 555–56, etc.) is taken in isolation, and this proposition is further developed with the help of the idea of divine omnipotence and omniscience in such a way that there no longer exists any serious distinction between God's "No" and "Yes" in this business. Then it would hold true that "God also wills (!) nothingness" (cf. Härle, *Sein und Gnade*, p. 241).

<sup>591</sup> Cf. W. Härle and E. Herms, *Rechtfertigung. Das Wirklichkeitsverständnis des christlichen Glaubens* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1979), p. 191.

<sup>592</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 95.

<sup>593</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 191.

Hence, this line of thinking takes up the Catholic tradition's "classic answer" to the problem of evil.<sup>594</sup> This answer proceeds "from the fact that reality is created good by God, but that evil became a reality through a historical decision of creatures gifted with freedom."<sup>595</sup> The creatures who are blessed with freedom are of course not only human beings but also angels; and so the attempt to reduce the problem of evil to the problem of human sin has instigated extensive discussion in Catholic theology.<sup>596</sup> But in relation to human persons it also holds true that "freedom is freedom to say 'yes' or 'no' to God."<sup>597</sup> A human person can "deny himself in such a way that he really and truly says 'no' to God himself."<sup>598</sup>

So, together with Barth, this perspective is concerned with not thinking of God as the originator of sin and with it of evil.<sup>599</sup> Sin and evil should be understood as entirely *the creature's fault*. Yet, if when they sin creatures do what God has made ontologically possible, then evil is finally rooted in God's action as Creator. Insofar as this is the case, it only *appears* that a way out of the dreaded monism has been found. God must make evil possible so that free creatures can exist. In so doing, God himself comes into a positive relation with evil. In view of the fact that evil has not remained pure possibility with any human being, God's action is highly ambiguous. If the believing self-consciousness justifiably resists this ambiguity,<sup>600</sup> we must ask whether this approach makes the proper assumptions when it pulls God and human freedom into such ambiguity at the very outset. Barth disputed this because he understood human freedom solely as the good possibility of the creature which God has made possible. As our interpretation of the interrelation of freedom and earthly life has shown,<sup>601</sup> freedom is in no sense understood as a kind of

<sup>594</sup> Cf. W. Kaspar, "Das theologische Problem des Bösen," in *Teufel, Dämonen, Besessenheit. Zur Wirklichkeit des Bösen*, 2nd ed., ed. W. Kaspar and K. Lehmann (Mainz: Matthias-Grünwalde Verlag, 1978), pp. 52–53.

<sup>595</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>596</sup> Among others, see H. Haag, K. Elliger, and W. Elliger, *Vor dem Bösen ratlos?* (Munich/Zurich: R. Piper, 1978); and K. Lehmann, "Der Teufel—ein personales Wesen?" in Kaspar and Lehmann, eds., *Teufel, Dämonen, Besessenheit*, p. 71ff.

<sup>597</sup> K. Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, trans. W. V. Dych (New York: Crossroad, 1985), p. 100.

<sup>598</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101. Clearly, what is emphasized in Rahner's work is that sin must "never be understood as an existential–ontological parallel possibility of freedom alongside the possibility of a 'yes' to God" (p. 102); Cf. Kaspar, "Das theologische Problem des Bösen," in Kaspar and Lehmann, eds., *Teufel, Dämonen, Besessenheit*, p. 54, who converges with Barth's manner of expression: "In evil the creature affords a powerfulness to the possibility which has been excluded by God as nothing."

<sup>599</sup> Cf. Härle and Herms, *Rechtfertigung*, p. 94.

<sup>600</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 67–68.

<sup>601</sup> Cf. above, p. 69.

"higher compulsion." But the agency of God the Creator could be advocated just as clearly without having to conceive of human dignity to consist in the fact that women and men are capable of destroying and have in fact destroyed their creatureliness. Given that God is a God of love, the spectral and excessive human demand to choose between good and evil does not constitute the good creature God has made. Hence it is possible to think through God's uncompromising opposition to evil more rigorously along these lines than it is where evil is seen as a possibility accommodated by God.

For this reason any theology that wants to proceed from the situation in which human beings find themselves and their "experiences" can only present a serious alternative to Barth's doctrine of nothingness as "an ontological impossibility" if it also understands evil as something ontologically "without cause" within the creaturely sphere.<sup>602</sup> In the act of confessing sin—something that only becomes possible on the basis of forgiveness—women and men can literally appeal to nothing.<sup>603</sup> "For now the forgiveness of one's own life becomes the object."<sup>604</sup> If, however, they want to appeal to their creatureliness and thereby to God as the ground of their guilt, then God can truly "only become a devil" for them.<sup>605</sup> This is because time and again in the situation of sin God becomes a *deus absconditus* for them, so that faith in God must be enacted as a constant countermovement to this perversion itself.<sup>606</sup> Only in this way are overcome the troubling and tempting questions that repeatedly cause God to disappear into the obscurity of human willing and doing.

Barth also spoke of faith in this countermovement. But he was concerned not to allow the situation in which humans are confronted by evil existentially—to which his thinking definitely refers—to become the basic pattern for answering all theological questions. He perceived the danger that such an approach ascribes the distortion and concealment of the action of the gracious God a necessity alien to what faith knows. The God revealed in Jesus Christ must not once more become for us an obscure fate in keeping with some sort of necessity. So also for theology, evil and sin cannot be the sorts of things that determine the interrelations of faith in God and the Christian life.

<sup>602</sup> Cf. Mostert, "Gott und das Böse," p. 470.

<sup>603</sup> Cf. G. Ebeling, *Dogmatik des christlichen Glaubens*, Band I (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1979), p. 373: In faith's understanding "sin is not talked about . . . without being aware of its forgiveness."

<sup>604</sup> Mostert, "Gott und das Böse," p. 468.

<sup>605</sup> Cf. M. Luther, "Psalm 117," *Luther's Works*, vol. 14, p. 31: "In short, God cannot be God unless He first becomes a devil. We children cannot go to heaven unless we first go to hell. We cannot become God's children until we first become children of the devil."

<sup>606</sup> Cf. Ebeling, *Dogmatik des christlichen Glaubens*, p. 169ff. and 254ff.

Especially in a world in which the magnitude of evil leads people to the conclusion that it would be better were they to have no God at all, proclamation and theology must lay evil bare as something without prospect and without a future. In faith in God there is no closed circuit in which evil constantly and necessarily renews itself. Hence in the freedom afforded by God, evil can be resisted, even though human beings are always subject to it. An alternative to Barth's doctrine of nothingness would always have to be measured by whether it is capable of being more explicit about this.

### ON THE PROBLEM OF THE "REALITY" OF SIN

Clearly integral to the definitiveness with which Barth speaks of nothingness is his view that the perverse reality of nothingness is not exhausted in human sin. The trend in more recent theology to see evil only in discretely human behavior is of course understandable given the criticism of an image of the world in which evil could be envisaged as a kind of independent reality alongside God and the human creature. But theology cannot appropriate this critique for its own such that it would understand human beings only as "the product of a social interaction" and the "result of the process of [their] actions."<sup>607</sup> For then good as well as evil would be located only in human activity.<sup>608</sup>

In contrast to this trend, it would certainly not be theology's task, as Barth sees it, to prove or to defend the "existence of evil" and the "personality of the devil." For Barth's is not at all concerned with the independent reality of nothingness or any other "mythologizing" of its being.<sup>609</sup> Rather, faith in its own way resists every attempt to grant autonomy to nothingness in some image of the devil or demons; it does so by opposing such attempts with a "most radical *disbelief*" and thus "demythologizing" the appearance that what it at issue in nothingness is a power equal to God.<sup>610</sup> For this reason, Barth is also not concerned with disputing the view that the problem of nothingness is above all a problem of sinful human persons. Whatever can be explained as the share of sinful men and women in the work and effect of nothingness

<sup>607</sup> Cf. C. Gremmels, "Die Sünde—das Böse—die Schuld. Soziologische Aspekte," in *Die Sünde—das Böse—die Schuld. Aus theologischer, ärztlicher und soziologischer Sicht*, ed. G. Altner and E. Anders (Stuttgart: Radius Verlag, 1971), p. 43.

<sup>608</sup> W. Mostert's statement that "evil is human sin and nothing else" ("Gott und das Böse," p. 475) takes account of the negative side of this understanding of the human.

<sup>609</sup> So argues Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Dramatis Personae: The Person of Christ*. Trans. G. Harrison, vol. 33 of his *Theo-Drama* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), pp. 478–79. For Barth, God's "Yes" and "No" only have meaning in relation to the creature and to creation, so that even talk of God's "No" to nothingness cannot point to a sphere which exists in and of itself without the creation.

<sup>610</sup> Cf. *CD* III/3, p. 521.

ought to be explained. Even empirically researched reasons for concretely sinful human behavior can be looked at in the course of this. The more such reasons—for example of a social and psychological type—are understood, the better! Barth's ethics of the Christian life—which relies so heavily upon the actual possibilities human beings possess for reacting against nothingness—in no way blocks contact and dialogue with the knowledge of our time. Yet what Barth does dispute is the claim that empirically discernible reasons such as these can adequately elucidate matters beyond the actual power of nothingness. In the encounter with Jesus Christ, we are able to see that sinful human beings do something that oversteps the presuppositions and consequences of their own possibilities for acting. To attribute evil only to human behavior does not keep up with the view of reality afforded by the event of Christ. The death of Jesus Christ on the cross opens our eyes to the fact that the disaster of nothingness cannot be delimited to human behavior. Because it makes the extent of nothingness visible, the cross protects believers from succumbing to the illusion that they are able to limit its power themselves.

The struggle of Christians with nothingness will have to be waged just as soberly as it is free of illusions—sober in that Christians can laugh at every attempt to make evil into some sort of figure onto whom they could shift blame; free of illusions in that they regard their knowledge of concrete evil and their struggle with it as the relative work of those who have been freed by God and so as work which cannot claim to bring an end to nothingness.

### SUFFERING UNDER NOTHINGNESS AND PRAYER

Nothingness remains a power with which human beings must reckon as long as God's grace with the world has not reached its eschatological end. It remains a power under which people suffer and with which they harm each other and God's entire creation. Persons empowered by God for the struggle against nothingness are, for this reason, always powerless and afflicted ones whose possibilities for response are exhausted in confrontation with concrete evil in the world. Karl Barth made clear at many points in the *Church Dogmatics* why Christians in this situation will not abstractly draw God into situations of indictment.<sup>611</sup> Indeed, Christians are involved with the God who first allowed all this suffering to come upon himself by affording the sinful world time and opportunity to become a world which corresponds to

<sup>611</sup> See the summary of Barth's remarks on the question of theodicy by Krause, *Leiden Gottes*, pp. 330–31.

God. To this extent, persons who suffer in fact also "share in God's sufferings at the hands of a godless world."<sup>612</sup>

However, this does not mean that human beings must finally come to terms with nothingness. Rather, according to Barth, it is in prayer within the Christian life where the intention to fight nothingness may be constantly renewed in the midst of suffering. For the prayer of Christians is not only their agreeing with what God has already done. It also has "the character of a co-determination of the divine action."<sup>613</sup> God's children and partners are permitted to speak with God because he is not a "supreme being who is self-enclosed" and "condemned to work alone."<sup>614</sup> They can, so to speak, participate in God's governance of the world. Their praying stands under the great sign of the petition for the coming of God's Kingdom, wherein God will have allowed nothingness to pass away completely. So expressions of suffering and even suggestions for provisionally overcoming it fittingly belong in such prayer. Moreover, questions regarding God's relationship to the world taken up in the problem of theodicy are here made the concrete questions of God's partners who are concerned for the world because of God's grace. As such, they are proper questions even if they are taken up in entirely new ways and answered in God's "gracious transformation."<sup>615</sup>

So long as Christians still speak with God in this way and can hope in God, they also have not finished suffering under the magnitude of nothingness. For this reason, they are given a new and concrete beginning in resisting nothingness, a resistance which belongs unconditionally to their witness to Jesus Christ in the world.

<sup>612</sup> D. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, enlarged ed., ed. E. Bethge, trans. R. Fuller et al. (London: SCM Press, 1971), p. 361.

<sup>613</sup> Barth, *The Christian Life*, p. 105.

<sup>614</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103.

<sup>615</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 106.

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— David Willis











